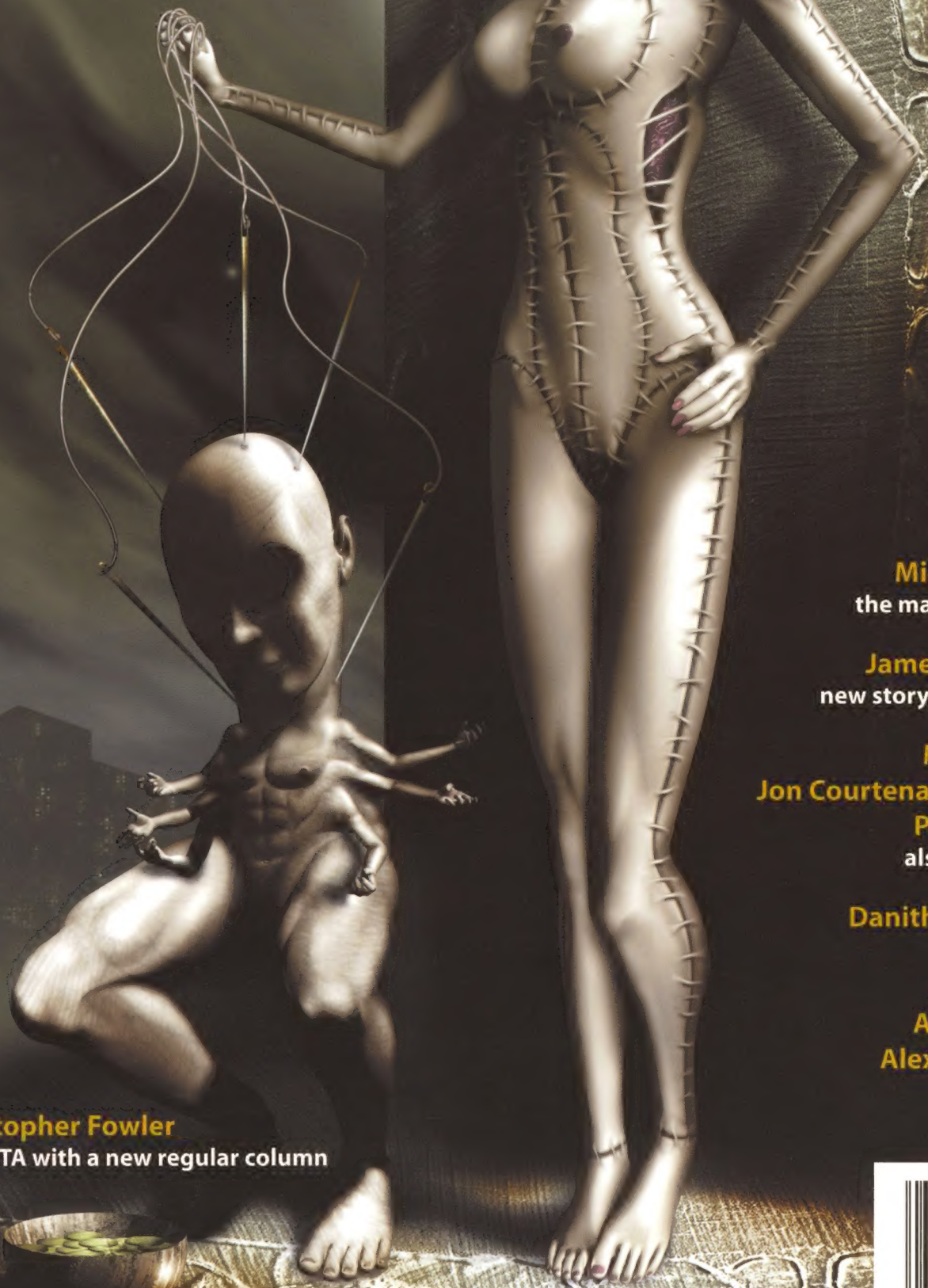


INCLUDES THE REVIEW

# THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

EXTRAORDINARY NEW FICTION • CINEMA • ART

ISSUE 26 • UK £3.25 • USA \$5 • CANADA \$6



**Christopher Fowler**  
joins TTA with a new regular column

**Michael Powell**  
the magic in his films

**James Lovegrove**  
new story and interview

**Michel Faber**  
**Jon Courtenay Grimwood**  
**Paul McAuley**  
also interviewed

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**Simon Ings**  
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more stories

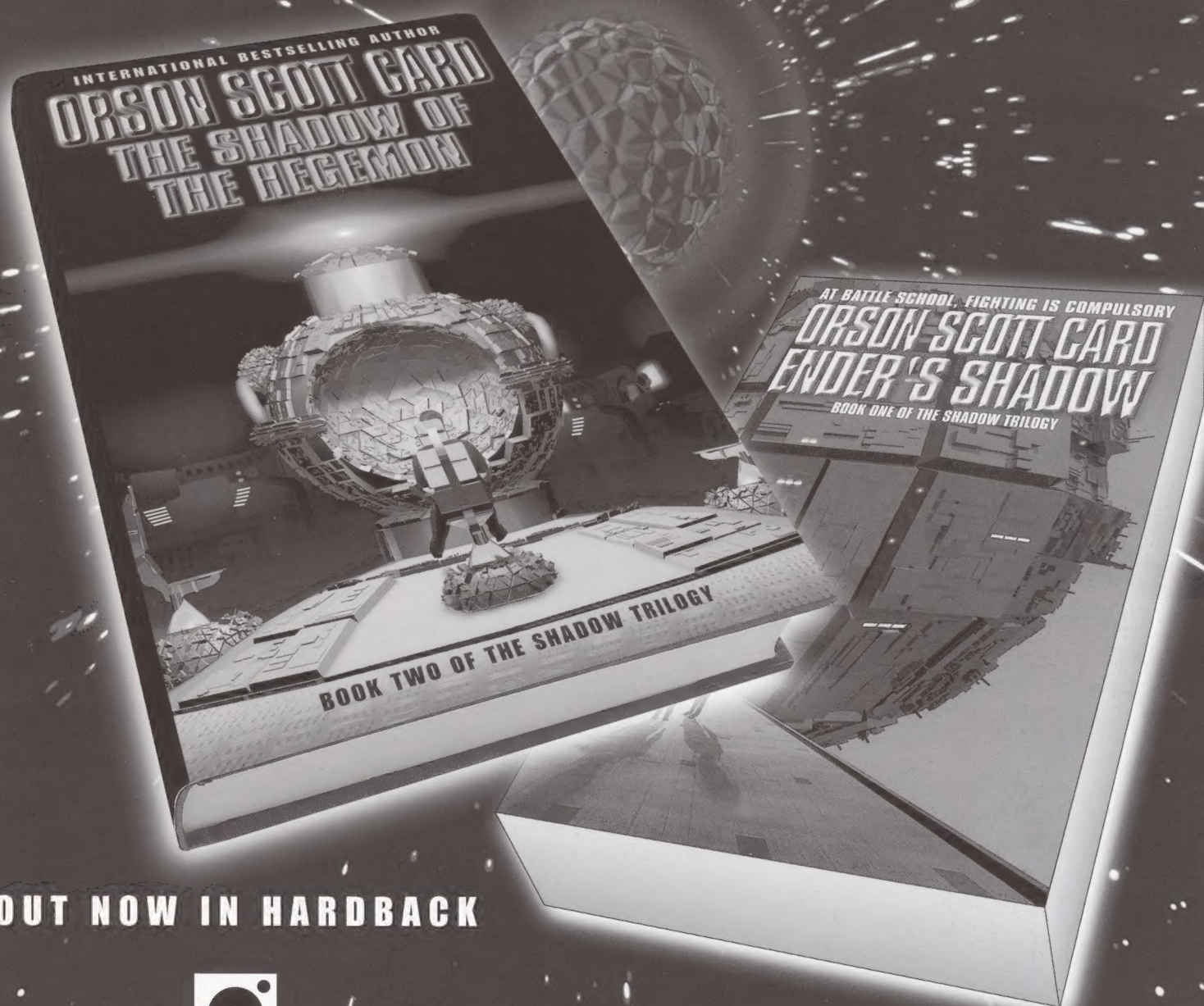




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Stories, artwork and proposed features are welcome. Please study several issues of the magazine before submitting and always enclose adequate return postage, otherwise we cannot reply. Overseas submissions should be disposable and accompanied by two International Reply Coupons or simply an email address (this option is for overseas submissions only). Writers in the US may send submissions (with SAE) to the US address. Always enclose a covering letter and send just one story at a time. No reprints, no simultaneous submissions. Letters and queries are welcome via email but actual submissions should only be sent via snail mail. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused

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# EDITORIAL

WAYNE EDWARDS, OLYPHANT, PENNSYLVANIA, USA

There is big news at TTA Press. *The Third Alternative* is now receiving broader distribution in North America. In addition, *Crimewave* will also be widely available for the first time in the United States and Canada with its next issue. To make it even easier for readers (and writers) to communicate with TTA, a new US office is opening to handle subscription traffic and any questions or queries that might arise.

What I like best about all the new developments is I get to run the US office. I have been reading *The Third Alternative* since almost the very beginning. The magazine fascinated me with its incredible artwork and literate short fiction. I was an instant fan. So when the opportunity arose for me to get more involved, I jumped at it.

Who am I? I have been trolling the writing and publishing fields for about fifteen years. I edited the anthology series *Palace Corbie* through a fairly successful run of eight volumes and one 'Best Of' collection. Some of my short stories have been included in anthologies like *Young Blood* and *Darkside*, I write regular book reviews and occasional features for *Cemetery Dance* magazine, and my first novel will appear in 2002 from Dark Tales Publications. I have been around the ride a few times, then, and I am as enthused and excited about writing and publishing as ever.

In the coming months, *The Third Alternative* will continue to present some of the best new fiction available anywhere. But that is not all. With the current issue Christopher Fowler begins a regular column in the magazine, the cover art is created by the incomparable David Ho, and writers like Danith McPherson and Simon Ings make their TTA debuts. There is always something new and exciting happening at *The Third Alternative*. A subscription to the magazine is the best way to ensure you don't miss a beat, and there has never been a better time to subscribe. With the opening of the US office, TTA is able to reduce its shipping costs and transit time, which means if you live in the US or Canada, you will get your subscription copies faster and for a lot less cash than before.

And it doesn't end there, because now potential contributors in the US and Canada can send their story submissions to me in my capacity of assistant editor. The standard guidelines remain (SAE essential) but being able to send submissions to the US office means another saving on postage. It's all good.

Come along on the journey with us and enjoy extraordinary fiction, art and commentary in the award-winning *The Third Alternative*. There is nothing like it anywhere else on the planet.

**Other News**

The new lower subscription rates to the USA and Canada can be found in the usual place on the left, and also in the new pull-out supplement bound into the middle of the magazine (this replaces the old subscriptions box on page 4, which is now used for artists' biographies).

The TTA Literary Prizes are cancelled and all entry fees are now being returned.

The Correspondent feature will return next issue. This is intended as a series of relevant news reports from TTA readers around the globe. If you'd like to contribute please email us.

TTA has an electronic news and letters column for subscribers called TTA Talkback. To join simply send a blank email to ttatalkback-subscribe@egroups.com, then you'll be able to receive regular news updates, participate in live chats, read letters and comment on any aspect of this magazine. Looking forward to hearing from you!

Coming soon: new stories by Mike O'Driscoll, Cliff Burns, Paul Meloy, James Van Pelt and others, cover artwork by Mike Bohatch, Peter Tennant on the gospel according to Luke *The Diceman* Rhinehart, interviews and reviews and much, much more.



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## THE ARTISTS



### DAVID HO

David was born in New York in 1969. Life was quite normal until his college days at UC Berkeley where his experiences were 'mind altering'. After attaining a Sociology degree he decided to dedicate himself to art, and he now works as a freelance designer/illustrator. Most of his design projects have been created for the computer industry while his illustration has been predominantly for card games.



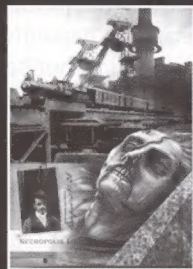
### MIKE BOHATCH

Mike is a professional commercial illustrator and graphic designer from California specialising in dark imagery and surreal compositions. His works can be found in numerous publications and CD packages. His technique and creation process combines the mediums of drawing, painting, assemblage, collage, photography, sculpture and digital compositing.



### STEVE BIDMEAD

Steve is a freelance graphic artist from Enfield, Middlesex. He is presently designing album covers for a rock band.



### JOACHIM LUETKE

Joachim has created arresting images for a variety of venues, including posters, ads and CDs. Born in 1957 in Germany, he studied art in Switzerland during the late seventies, and improved his unique, disturbing talent at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria from 1980-86. He still lives in Vienna as a successful multimedia artist.



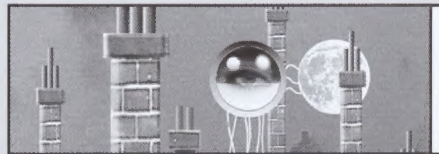
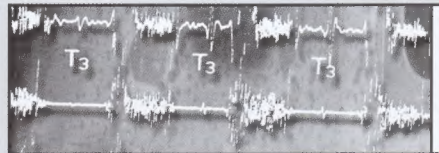
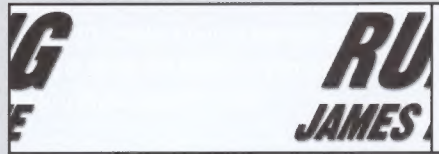
### RODDY WILLIAMS

Roddy lives in London and recently studied illustration at The London Institute and Middlesex University. A chequered career includes writing for a Hammersmith-based Theatre Company, where he also ran set-design workshops; employment with British Telecom; freelance illustration, selling Gothic Objets D'art from a stall in London's Portobello Road market and writing material for his brother, an alternative comedian.



### ROB MIDDLETON

Driven by obsession and the avoidance of getting a 'proper job' over the years Rob has done just about every art course and scheme he could find, finally completing, in June 1999, a full time degree in Visual Studies at the Norwich School of Art and Design. Meanwhile he has continually been doing cover art, T-shirt designs etc, primarily within the punk/hardcore/metal underground. He is currently working between home and the studio space he has in the Norwich Warehouse artists studios.





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**"The first day is for relatives. The second is for children and the innocent. The third day of the dead is for those who died of witchcraft and hexing."**

Raymond only half heard his wife's shouted explanation. Festivities clogged the square below the balcony of their hotel suite with locals and a few islands of tourists. Chatter and laughter interlaced with strumming guitars. Paraders in skeleton costumes wriggled and writhed through the crowd, cavoring across a tiled plaza that forced the paved main street to be diverted elsewhere. Sagging strips of unmatched colored lights that seemed to have been donated from boxes of Christmas decorations streaked the bone faces with an unnatural sunset. Brightly dressed matrons cradled portraits of what must be their deceased loved ones. The women offered lit candles to the dimming evening, adding burnt wax to the incense of baked bread. As a man rooted in practical matters, Raymond King Stanton felt repulsed by the abstract, unprovable mythology behind the reverie; as a businessman, he analyzed the mismanaged economic potential.

What an absurd, macabre way to attract visitors and boost commerce. His wife Theresa had come up with this end-of-the-line, sand-drifted New Mexico town for their only vacation in five years of marriage. When she said she knew of the perfect haven in the desert, Raymond got the idea that the place had been recommended to her by one of her caviar

and mineral water acquaintances on the museum fund-raising committee. He had envisioned a secluded spa, quaint yet luxuriously posh, on the precipice of becoming the latest overpriced, trendy refuge of the art-patron crowd. Instead, from its adobe buildings to its weathered-wood walkways, Puerta del Sol was an affront to civilization while trying, not very hard or successfully, to be a tourist trap. Anyone would be crazy to come here in July, or to come here at all.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Raymond called back into the suite.

Theresa's laugh drifted out with the cooled air leaking from the open balcony door. She followed, sealing the glass barrier behind her. Her black hair, sleek as cat fur, drifted in curves onto her shoulders, smothering the flowered print of her Satan robe. Wide, dark-fringed velvet eyes were set in a perfect, cameo face. She padded across the painted wooden floor on bare feet and handed Raymond a clinking glass of scotch and ice. "You'll love the mission and the art gallery I told you about, and the celebration of the Days of the Dead is true to a very old tradition." She was so relaxed in this wilderness, not like the edgy starling she was in New York.

"Look." Theresa pointed to a pair of platforms being carried through the crowd. Each held a four-foot high primitive stone statue. One was a hideous pop-eyed skeleton with grinning teeth and a domed hat flattened in front and back. The other, a grotesque woman with bare breasts sagging against her chest, wore a skirt of woven snakes cinched with a sharp-tongued rattler. "They are Mictlantecuhli, who is the Lord of the Dead, and his consort Mictlantecihuatl, the Lady of the Dead."

"Charming couple." Raymond sipped at his drink. Even the liquor here tasted of dust and heat. He should be in Los Angeles, significantly advancing his career and his personal fortune. He had started working at Photography Technologies almost a decade ago when the name said it all. Now it was PTech, a dinosaur in an anaconda industry. Photography had evolved into 'visual imaging' while the corporation had updated little more than its moniker.

In an article in a technical journal that his boss, Vice-President-fossil Larry Horton, relied on underlings to read for him, Raymond had discovered Real Illusions, the company that was going to pull PTech from the tar pits. Talent rich and capital poor, the tiny electronics enterprise was on the verge of a breakthrough in 3D video. It was perfect for absorption into PTech, and Raymond was prepared to be the sponge. But squat, squinty-eyed Horton had screwed Raymond out of the assignment and given it to Jeremy Compton, although the ink was barely dry on the tall, lanky kid's ivy league MBA.

Raymond got heart palpitations every time he imagined the salary and platinum benefits package that must have been thrown at Compton to entice him into a corporation that — no matter how historically prestigious — was in danger of letting itself become extinct. In addition to the salary and stock options, Horton had probably promised to make the neophyte his heir apparent and put him on the express elevator to the CEO's office.

A similar guarantee had been dangled in front of Raymond for years, except that he recognized a gold-plated phallus on a string when he saw it. His gallop toward the twirling enticement was only for show, to keep the power structure convinced that he was a well-trained donkey chasing his own corporate-castrated dick. All the while he was directing his intelligence toward a twenty-four karat reward of his own design.

Raymond had counted on being personally involvement in the acquisition of Real Illusions. Instead Horton had spooned up bullshit about Raymond supervising the negotiations from a distance and mentoring the new guy through this valuable



learning experience, so he would know how things were done at PTech. The Formica-hard truth was that once Compton got the signatures, Raymond's contribution to the project would never be mentioned again.

But Horton's shiny new protege was about to learn one of those lessons that only experience can provide. Still an amateur, Compton obsessively focused on the carrot, convinced that a single sprint in a straight line would make it his. That meant he wasn't paying attention to the landscape. He hadn't noticed that he was in a sinkhole. And I'm the bastard sucking away the sand, Raymond gloated. Compton couldn't possibly close the deal because Raymond was the controlling partner in an investment firm whose sole asset was Real Illusions. The only PTech executive the firm was going to strike a deal with for the purchase of RI was Raymond.

The cell phone stayed close by at all times. When the frantic call came from New York, whining that the young Turk couldn't pull it off and that Horton needed Raymond to repair the damage, he'd be ready to swoop in and save the day.

Raymond knew the situation boiled with risk. If Horton, or anyone at PTech, discovered his little conflict of interest, Raymond would have to resign to avoid being fired. Wherever he eventually ended up, Compton, with that feral glint in his contact-lens-blue eyes, would find some way to make the situation worse. That was the way of business.

Raymond watched the statues being jostled through the crowd in a strange dance. He decided that he liked the ancient skeleton lord and his serpent-draped lady, although Theresa was the real expert on such things. "I thought there was only one day to remember the dead and that it was at Halloween." At first marriage hadn't been part of the goals he had mapped out for himself. He'd learned from observing his own family that having people in your life drained away valuable resources of time, energy and money. Companionship had never been a problem. With curly, dark brown hair and gold-flecked eyes, he'd never had difficulty attracting a women.

Then he had met Theresa at a museum fund raiser, and he had to have her all to himself. Six years her senior, he had dazzled her away from younger suitors. She had been a very immature twenty-one when they married. Over the years he had molded her into a sophisticated beauty and a business asset. "Your ancestors were kings," she would tell him when she wanted to tease him. "How could I resist you?"

"The Christian version is just after Halloween," Theresa said. "It's really two days — All Saints Day and All Souls Day, November first and second."

"Then why are they putting themselves through this in the middle of the summer?" Across the street a juggler in a bright red baggy suit with exaggerated gold piping and a giant yellow flower in the lapel kept life-sized skulls arcing through the air. His face was painted bone white with black around the eyes. At any moment Raymond expected him to add his own head to the whirling pattern. Something in the man's moves reminded Raymond of his Uncle Dwight, his father's brother, the embarrassment of the family.

In defiance of an iron edict from Raymond's grandfather, Dwight had studied literature and philosophy in college instead of practical fields. When he graduated, he had been completely unqualified for a job that would have gotten him anywhere in life. He had spent years traveling to crazy places with unpronounceable names and no sanitation. During that time, Raymond would unexpectedly received packages with foreign marks stamped all over them. His mother had made him throw away the dried bull testicles, but he still had the jade tiger in a cardboard box with his report cards.

Uncle Dwight had ended up teaching at a minor college

somewhere — in New Mexico Raymond suddenly remembered — married and with too many children. He had died almost penniless. No respectable member of the family had attended the funeral. By then Raymond's grandfather had passed away. As the oldest brother and, therefore, the head of the family, Raymond's father had expected the widow to contact him asking for financial support; but she never did.

Raymond finished his drink. Uncle Dwight hadn't escaped one particular portion of the family legacy. The men died suddenly and early. Raymond couldn't think of a single male relative on his father's side who had made it past his sixtieth birthday. At thirty-two, he felt the pressure, but he was on track to reach his goal of being independently wealthy by the time he turned forty-five. Then he would retire to the unworried luxury his father had chased after but never been able to capture. The Real Illusions deal was another step forward, but it had even greater importance than that.

Raymond's father had never owned a painting or a sculpture of significance; yet, with financial backing from the sale of Real Illusions, the Robert King Stanton Collection would forever link his name with culture and idle wealth — the things Raymond's father had wanted most and never achieved. The paperwork setting up the tax-exempt foundation awaited Raymond's signature.

He would launch the collection by donating some of the antiquities Theresa had helped him purchase over the years. She would be furious, but she couldn't stop him. Who knows, in this backward town he might find the treasure that would define the entire collection and make it world famous. Watching the skeletal performer, he was shocked to recall his uncle's stupid jokes, the nonsense songs he had sung for Raymond and his cousins at Christmas, and that the man could juggle anything.

Theresa leaned against the wrought iron railing and soberly watched the festivities below. "According to the Aztec calendar, the Days of the Dead are celebration in the month of Miccailhuitontli, which is now. Some things must be done according to the old ways in order to get them right."

Absently Raymond stored away the hard data part of Theresa's explanation for future reference. His wife was always soaking up these odd bits of information from her volunteer work at the museum. Raymond found them useful for intimidating the opposition at business dinners. Moving the pagan Days of the Dead so they rode tandem with Catholic feast days must have been the Spanish missionaries' idea.

Priests knew about marketing, but then they had a tough product to sell. Raymond swirled his glass of fading ice to ward off the desert heat with the clinking of shards. How did people live in a place so fierce, so infertile, so absolute?

The rotating skulls, launched by the juggler's fluid hands, mesmerized Raymond. For months Theresa had hinted, then suggested, and finally invoked every argument within her power to get him to budge out of New York for something other than business. The only stone she hadn't hurled at him was divorce. A rosary-toting Catholic, she was unlikely to ever demand one; and financially she had much to lose.

He controlled the money, so he controlled her life. A rigid prenuptial agreement granted Theresa a personal monthly allowance while they were married. It increased significantly with each offspring she produced. An additional allotment would be paid to each minor-aged child. When Raymond died, most of the estate went to the Stanton Collection. If the marriage ever dissolved, his ex-wife would receive only a modest flat sum. She would automatically have custody of any children. In contrast to the stingy settlement for Theresa, provisions for child support were beyond generous. Still, any way you



looked at it, the contract prevented Theresa from dismantling the wealth Raymond continued to carefully construct.

Theresa had loved the extravagant treatment of the hypothetical children so much that she barely read the rest of the document. Taking it as a sign that Raymond wanted a household full of drooling, excreting, demanding dependants as much as she did, she had kissed him and kissed him again right there in the oak and leather office of the top New York law firm, drawing a vulgar smirk from his solicitor. Then Theresa had penned her name on the line with great care, as if it were a covenant for the children themselves. But there had been no brats to interfere with his life, and there would be none.

The one slip up had been taken care of. Raymond enjoyed the knowledge that he had more influence over his wife than the Catholic church. She had refused, then resisted, then argued and anguished but finally agreed to the abortion. Some primeval fear for his manhood had kept Raymond from getting a vasectomy before the marriage, as he should have. The pregnancy put his ego in its proper place, behind his financial objectives. He took care of the situation as quickly as he could.

Even without the threat of a divorce, Theresa had used some powerful weapons against Raymond to get him to come on this vacation. Strange, after successfully dodging every one and having no intention of giving in, the situation with the RI deal had suddenly changed so that getting out of New York for a few strategic days became an advantage.

A band of drums and flutes wove through the parade like a serpent. The musicians shared a facial structure that Raymond was beginning to notice in many of the town's residents. The proportion of forehead to nose to cheeks to chin seemed to fall within similar ratios. Raymond decided that it was his imagination. No ethnic group was that pure anymore. The strolling minstrels were probably brothers and maybe not from here at all.

When Raymond looked back at the juggler, a vendor selling bundles of marigolds stood in the place where he had been. Raymond sipped at liquefied ice. He planned to leave as soon as the call came. The cell phone, elegantly slim, rested on the table. He picked it up for reassurance. Getting to this lost town hadn't been simple and getting away wouldn't be either. They'd rented a car in San Something-or-other, the quasi-city that held the closest airport. At the dingy counter where he'd filled out the insurance information, he had gotten the name and phone number of a taxi service that would dispatch a cab all the way to Puerta del Sol to retrieve him. That way he could leave the car for Theresa. This might be his only night at the Fountain Hotel, his only night here with her.

Raymond took his wife's hand and led her back into the sandstone and mauve suite, to the bedroom and the king-sized bed. The full force of the scotch and the air conditioning smacked him like an ocean wave. A heavy canvas of fatigue dropped over him and he cursed. "We have other nights," Theresa said. "You must relax and let your strength build." He remembered nothing else until morning.

When he awoke he felt more than refreshed, he felt renewed. Bold New Mexico sun pushed through the blinds. The sheets slithered and rustled as he stretched out his arms, legs and back. Three days a week he worked out at an exclusive fitness club for the business contacts. Now he reveled in the tone and prowess it gave his body.

Theresa stepped out of the vanity area. Her smile made all other feelings irrelevant. "Such a sleepy head! You almost missed the entire morning." She was no longer the progressively weary, distressed wife he had been living with, but the young woman he'd married, as if the accumulated soot and

grime of the city had been sloughed away, revealing the luster the artist had intended.

She looked more than exquisite. A pale dress of layer on layer of sheer flowered fabric draped in folds over her curvy olive skin. He didn't know her ethnic background. He'd never asked, mostly because he didn't care but also because it might spoil the mystic. At the museum he saw her profile carved into the statues of queens and goddesses from civilizations rich in power and culture — Egyptian, Mayan, Aztec. She was superb, and she belonged to him. "Come to bed," he said.

"Tonight." She fiddled with the delicate filaments of gold dangling from an ear.

"New earrings?" They seemed alive with a warm, ancient sheen.

"I've had them awhile."

"They look like they could ward off ghosts." He often teased her about her superstitions. The heavy lace veil of Catholicism couldn't quit suffocate a primitive belief in supernatural, occult nonsense.

Instead of snapping at the bait, this surprisingly confident, radiant Theresa shrugged. "What makes you think I want to keep them away? During the Days of the Dead, you should invite spirits back from the underworld to walk with you."

"There must be some dearly departed that are not on your A list."

Theresa laughed with such lightness that Raymond imagined he could float away on it. She ran her fingers through the gold threads of her earring, like playing a harp. "You make fun of me for protecting myself. Yet, you cast hexes every time you use your cell phone. You chant spells in the foreign tongue of market shares and fax ethereal documents through the air. You bedazzle your prey with visions of imaginary, shiny objects then convince them to sign away their souls." She suddenly studied the floor. Her long, dark lashes feathered the crescents under her eyes. "Of course, it's easy when you already own the soul and you're simply renegotiating the terms."

He relied on her to keep him sharp on art, world events, and the hot issues within their social circle. They never discussed business in detail, but she didn't revolve around him in a coma. She'd overheard his side of conversations. The Real Illusions situation wasn't the first time he'd leveraged an event so it would benefit him through more than one route. Nor was it the first time he'd engineered someone else's failure.

"Are you sure you won't come with me?" Theresa asked. She had appointments to visit the studios of several local artists. "You might enjoy the masks and the textile art."

"I have phone calls to make."

She held her hands in front of her face and wiggled her fingers at him. "Ooh, casting spells against your enemies into the ether."

He smiled but really didn't find her taunting funny. Maybe it felt too close to the truth.

Theresa picked up her woven bag from the dresser. "I'll meet you at the Mictlan Gallery at four. We can look at some things. Then over dinner we'll discuss what we want to buy." She pulled out a brochure and placed it on the nightstand next to his phone. "This gives the address."

"I'm sure I can find it." There wasn't enough of a town to get lost in. Besides, he would probably be on his way to Los Angeles by then.

After Theresa left, Raymond speed dialed Allister McQuinn, founder and president of Real Illusions. The man knew electronics and had good business instincts, but he'd been afflicted with the curse of nervous investors who bailed out when they didn't get immediate Silicon Valley level profits. That left the company a bargain for Raymond's newly formed Tower Invest-







ments. As part of the contract, Raymond brought McQuinn in as a partner, thereby setting him up to deal with PTech and making him a reluctant participant in the scheme to dethrone Compton. If McQuinn could have held out on his own for four more months, he would have been selling straight to P-Tech without the complications of Raymond's personal agenda. He took Raymond's call but didn't pretend to be happy about it. No pleasantries, no small talk, Raymond admired him for that.

Force Compton back to square one, Raymond told McQuinn. Ask for clarification on each point you agreed to two days ago. Get the closing date moved forward another month. The man growled, "Yes, Master," and hung up.

Then Raymond called Compton. The sleaze wanted to do nothing but chit-chat. Yes, Raymond told him, the vacation was doing him a world of good, great weather, all that. And how was the Real Illusions contract going? Compton oozed with vague phrases of assured success; but Raymond could almost smell the anxious sweat, almost feel the tremble in the hand gripping the phone at the other end. The man was a frustrated wreck who couldn't believe the world wasn't spinning in the direction he willed it to.

Failure hadn't smacked him in the face before so he didn't have a strategy to handle it. Before now he probably hadn't believed it could happen to anyone as lovable as himself. Raymond had seen the affliction before. Now that Compton had started downward, he'd continue the plunge, too paralyzed by shock to figure out a way to stop the descent. Horton would soon discover that his diamond boy was just another lump of coal.

"Then you should have McQuinn's signature on an agreement by the end of the day, Pacific time," Raymond said. "Fax it to me so I can look it over, just as a formality. I'm sure it's fine, but we have to humor Horton, since he did ask me to keep an eye on the project for him."

Compton almost cracked wide open. "That might be a tiny bit premature," he sputtered.

"Don't let that hardware nerd McQuinn goad you into back-pedaling." Raymond broadcast confidence. The glorified punk in designer shirts with his initials embroidered on the cuffs was about to have his first acid taste of failure. It would be hard to swallow, but in the long run the tonic would do Compton some good. "Let me know when it's done. We'll celebrate when we both get back to New York."

Feeling very self-satisfied, Raymond ended the conversation. He got dressed, had room service deliver brunch, then went out to find a moderately priced present for his secretary and a mildly expensive one for Rebecca Scheff, his assistant and current mistress.

The side streets bordering the plaza were blocked off and had become the domain of children. Raymond ignored any shop with a sun-bleached animal bone mounted over the doorway and aimed toward a jewelry store with a respectable copper and black sign. Rebecca had been with his section for a few years. Shorter, rounder and more garish than he usually liked his women, he hadn't been sleeping with her too long, just since she did the research on Real Illusions. Her digging had provided Raymond with the information he needed to set up his scheme. She was his eyes, ears and subtle advocate back in New York while he wandered through a Georgia O'Keeffe painting.

Adults directed screaming youngsters in games and lizard races while parents and older siblings called out encouragement. Vendors selling marzipan skulls, rounded loaves of bread, candles, and marigolds clogged the sidewalks. It was too hot for so early.

Raymond wiped a thumb across his upper lip to brush away sweat that had already evaporated. He couldn't move without brushing against other bodies. Most of them didn't seem to notice. He had an itchy feeling at the back of his neck that someone was watching him, following him. How could he tell in this crowd? He tried to go faster, faster. He squeezed between people, offering curt apologies, and darted into the air conditioned jewelry store.

The interior sparkled with cut crystal and rainbow gemstones behind polished glass, definitely more Bloomingdale's than desert trinkets. A woman in a crisp suit approached him, and he relaxed into an oasis of commerce set like liquid sapphire in a rock of absurdity. He described what he was looking for. While the woman showed him pins and necklaces, the itchy feeling returned. He resisted checking the large window that showed a wide swath of the street. For his secretary, he picked out a pin depicting the Hopi trickster Kokopelli playing his flute. Rebecca required a more ornate motif. A bolo style necklace of silver and turquoise had the right combination of flash and Southwestern flavor.

Raymond gladly handed over his credit card and signed at the X. The itch burned like an insect bite. He felt safe here, safe enough to pivot and glance into the street. A boy of about three or four with a gecko perched on his shoulder stood staring in at him.

Sleek, dark hair, velvet eyes, golden skin, he looked like all the children here, except more familiar. Behind him a short, solid woman in an unflattering gathered skirt and a cotton blouse ruffled at the neckline and the edge of the short sleeves grabbed the boy's hand. Her aged eyes shot venom at Raymond. Her creased leather face should have been framed by ash-gray, but her hair, parted in the middle and pulled back into a twisted bun, was onyx black. Her frowning mouth moved, and he knew she spoke to the boy. Raymond swallowed hard. In his haste to get through the crowd, he must have bumped into them with too much force. The child was slight. Raymond could have knocked him down to the rough boards of the walkway without realizing it. Still, the boy didn't seem hurt, only curious. So why was the woman, who might be the boy's grandmother, scowling at Raymond as if a blood sacrifice was in order?

Another child stood behind them, a chubby, older boy supporting a scraped and dented bike. Blond and rosy against the multicolored crowd, he grinned as if Raymond was his best friend and waved with all his might. Lenny Pulaski. Despite the obstructing horde, the boy got on his bike and, still grinning at Raymond and not watching where he was going, peddled out of sight. Raymond wanted to warn him. This time he truly wanted to stop Lenny from racing out in front of Mr Sagara's pickup, as he should have that summer day when they were both ten.

So much had changed in the months before that summer so long ago, and Raymond had embraced it all. His father had been promoted and had moved the family from a cookie-cutter, clapboard housing development into a brick-and-pillar neighborhood where kids rode unscratched bikes and attended a private academy. Raymond had wanted to pretend that his life had always been a shiny Schwinn and a room of his own; but Lenny, an embarrassing leftover from his former neighborhood, hadn't understood and had kept making a nuisance of himself.

On that day, Raymond, bronzed by the lazy Connecticut sun and surrounded by his new schoolmates, just wanted him to go away. He saw the truck and told himself that he only wanted to create a scare. He called the boy to him, knowing that, without a thought or a glance, trusting sunburned



Lenny would charge across the street to intrude on Raymond and his friends. Now from inside the jewelry store Raymond tried to shout, but the noise froze in his throat. The shrieking brakes, the thud, the crunch of bone and metal was just as he remembered it.

Raymond found himself in a plush chair with a lead crystal glass of water in his hand. The woman who had been helping him and a man in a suit who must have appeared from the back room hovered over him. "You are visiting relatives?" the woman asked.

"Vacationing." Why would she think he belonged here?

The woman raised her substantial eyebrows. "Then you are staying at the Fountain Hotel. Dr Diaz at the clinic is the hotel's doctor. Our sons will take you there. I'll call and say you're coming."

Four males, all immaculately attired in white shirts, dark ties and dress pants, ranging from late teens to early twenties stood behind the man and woman who must be their parents. The boys looked capable of physically hauling Raymond anywhere their mother ordered them to take him. Behind them at the counter three girls, who obviously also belonged to the family, wrapped Raymond's purchases in tissue paper and put them into a shiny bag. Nine people — too many to try to support with a store this size. That had been his father's mistake — four children who needed to go to expensive schools and dress like the sons and daughters of his bosses, leeching away resources that should have been invested in things that would make more money. "The heat made me a little dizzy, that's all," Raymond protested. "I'm fine, really. I'll just go back to the hotel."

The man and woman objected to him in English then chattered at one another and issued orders to their children in Spanish, who without hesitation responded "Sí, Mamma" and "Sí, Papa".

Raymond put the glass on the low transparent counter at his elbow. Engagement and wedding rings glittered at him from the display. He was sitting where happy couples held hands and spent more than they could afford on symbols of their love. Behind the counter on a mahogany table the portrait of a girl, beautiful as a bride in a First Communion dress and veil, smiled from a pearl embedded frame. A candle surrounded by marigolds burned to the side. "Our daughter," the man said softly. "Our little Corazon. One day a year she is with us again."

The second day of the dead, Raymond remembered, the day for children.

Raymond was escorted back to the hotel by the four brothers and the oldest sister, who held a gigantic sun umbrella over his head with one hand and carried the delicate paper bag by the cord handles in the other. The sun was overhead and the streets were almost deserted. Smart people stayed inside when there was no slant to their shadows. The little boy and the old woman were gone. So was Lenny Pulaski. Apparently ghosts didn't like the heat either.

Being delivered to the lobby like a mental patient who had wandered away from the ward was embarrassing. Raymond went straight past the spouting stone water basin that gave the place its name and up to the suite. He clung to his cell phone but got little satisfaction. McQuinn was in a meeting with Compton and was unavailable. Compton didn't answer the ringing in his pocket, and Raymond didn't feel like leaving a voice message. Rebecca was in a meeting with Horton and was unavailable.

Raymond switched on the compact hand-held device that gave him remote stock information twenty-four hours a day. He watched the comforting march of green LCD quotes while

he downed club sodas with lime. He called his broker with a buy order and a sell order. The plea for him to rush to Los Angeles and rescue P'Tech from Compton's incompetence never came. So, he had nothing better to do than meet his wife at the Mictlan Gallery.

The rose-tinted adobe building was a mixture of traditional shapes and modern materials, housing a diverse collection. Raymond let Theresa lead him through the maze of rooms with cream walls and natural oak floors. The first part was filled with standard southwestern desert paintings, something for the tourists to take home and hang over their living room couches. Then the monotonous, bleached sands and distant, rust-striped mountains gave way to masks set with azure and scarlet, weathered carvings and shockingly vivid geometric wall hangings. Theresa pointed out line, balance, color, and texture. Raymond thought of long-term investments that might be useful for impressing business associates. He saw nothing suitable for launching his father's collection.

Some pieces were contemporary; others appeared to be relics. The farther they explored, the more intimate and intimidating the displays became. Raymond began to feel uneasy as if he'd entered a lost world. At the statue of a jaguar he refused to continue, claiming he was starving.

They ate dinner at a mom and pop canteena. It seemed everything in the town was family owned and operated. The touristy decor was thick with black and white prints of Kokopelli and pastels of howling cartoon coyotes. A great clattering of dishes and laughter periodically roared from the back where Raymond figured the locals were being served spicier food and better beer at cheaper prices. Puerta del Sol seemed to be two towns — one a flat projection of the quaint, sunbaked Southwest where outsiders could wander; and the other a sensual, crimson-blooded cavern where only those born to it were allowed. Raymond wanted to peer into that back room, but he didn't want to enter. He and Theresa returned to their suite and sat on the balcony to watch the night's parade.

The intense sun dropped below the surrounding mountains, spreading long shades. A half dozen bands strolled by, the members all wearing enormous sombreros, strumming guitars and singing in Spanish, at least Raymond thought it was Spanish. The cadence seemed right, but he didn't recognize any of the words. Clusters of children tossing flowers and cellophane wrapped candy were herded past by adoring adults. They were interspersed with groups in Hopi and Navaho natives carrying smoldering bowls of herbs and bellowed chants. Pale visitors in designer label sportswear snapped photos from the sidewalk, built-in flashes exploding like weak fireworks. Only a few skeletons grinned their way through the paraders. The event seemed more chamber-of-commerce than last night's revelry.

When the last of the sunlight vanished, Theresa opened a labelless bottle of wine and filled cobalt-tinted glasses. They toasted the masqueraders and the musicians and the children. The skeletons increased. The juggler returned, twisting through the procession. Like quick fireflies his severed heads reflected the colored lights and the flames of torches mounted around the plaza. Raymond pointed him out to Theresa. "That guy's my Uncle Dwight come back from the grave to say hello."

"Don't make fun of something just because you don't believe in it." Theresa poured him more ruby liquid, releasing a musty odor.

"How can anyone take this seriously?" Raymond asked. The wine evoked rich soil and wooden vats stored in a cool cave. A slight bitterness surfaced in the aftertaste.

"All cultures have ways to make peace with the dead. The Aztecs and the Mayas soothe them with a festival. Specific



customs vary from village to village but it's always a celebration."

Raymond noticed that she used the present tense to refer to long-crumbled civilizations. Her museum work must make them seem alive to her. "No matter how dressed up they get for the tourists, these are modern people. I doubt any of them believes in all this vague hocus-pocus."

Theresa frowned. "When you purchase stocks, you buy pieces of paper you never see with money that is no more substantial than numbers on a computer screen."

"I buy ownership in a company that is represented by legal documents held by my broker, and I pay for it with electronically transferring funds. It's all very real. The tangible part is just somewhere else." After it was out of his mouth Raymond realized how deliciously abstract it all was. He chuckled at the metaphysical power he wielded. Tonight it seemed that anything could be real. Below a blond-haired boy propelled his bike through the musicians. "There goes Lenny." Raymond gestured with his wine glass, careful not to spill a single, delicious gem. "Ten years old forever and still believing that I'm his best friend."

"You mustn't mock anyone's attachment to you," Theresa said. "Your presence has an influence over people. It's in your blood, just like your other abilities that you take for granted and misuse." Theresa's voice seemed to travel to him from farther and farther away. Despite the orchestration and street noise, Raymond's eyelids flowed shut. "Your grandparents were afraid of that heritage," Theresa said. "They thought they could extinguish it in themselves and their descendants by moving away from the People and manufacturing a history of European immigrants. What they did was take us closer to extinction. But the kings are not the only ones with power."

Raymond felt his wife ease the stemmed glass from his hand, so it wouldn't slip to the floor. Then her fingers were on his shoulders, massaging the muscles. The wine kindled a warmth deep within him that ignited into fire.

Energy drained from his limbs, surging to the core of his being to feed the blaze. Internal flames licked his groin. He forced his eyes open. With effort, he captured Theresa and pulled her to him, surprised by her suddenly naked flesh. She slowly helped him shed his clothes. A desert breeze whisked away his sweat. Theresa guided him down to a carpet that flared with geometric squares repeating like a chant. The heavy scent of spice embedded in the soft nap cleared Raymond's head. Dancing torchlight made the shadows of the ornate iron railing flicker across Theresa's liquid skin.

There was nothing in the world but Theresa. Nothing he wanted but Theresa. He kissed the curve of her cheek, the small of her back, the tiny scar on her knee. His passion was intense and patient. They made love as if creating a ritual. He trembled with the pleasure of the long, satisfying climax.

When the rest of the world returned, Raymond realized that the plaza below was empty, the paraders having long ago left the night to the lovers. Coolness and exhaustion seeped through him. Theresa pulled a corner of the carpet over them and held him into sleep. In the morning Theresa, already dressed, woke him with a kiss and perfume.

Sunlight assaulted Raymond's eyes. It was already far into morning. He couldn't believe he had slept so long or so soundly on a balcony over a busy square. The carpet seemed scratchy against his skin.

Kneeling beside him, Theresa dropped a robe over his head. "Try not to shock the neighbors when you get up." There was a melody in her voice, like wind chimes.

Her silhouette looked wonderful through the rich fabric of the robe. Raymond allowed himself to attribute his wife's

cheerful, contented mood to his lovemaking the night before. The memory stirred a fantasy of moist skin and secret places. He felt more virile than in his college days and wanted to stand up, naked to the world, and piss from the balcony. He couldn't wait to call New York. "See if you can get some more of that wine we had last night."

"You liked that?"

Raymond ran a hand up her leg under her dress. "I liked the affects." He expected a reaction from his penis but felt nothing.

"The clerk said it's from a small farm, family run. They only sell a little of what they produce. Most of it they keep for themselves."

"They must be a very happy and prolific family."

Theresa brushed aside his probing hand. She stood and twirled away from him to the glass door. "I'm going to tour the Mission of San Rafael. Then I'll meet you at the gallery at noon and we'll buy the weaving and the sculpture, right?"

"Right." At the moment he could deny her nothing. He watched her leave then discreetly got into the robe. This was the only decent hotel in town, and he didn't want to risk getting kicked out for exposing himself to the gray-haired couple and their poodle on the balcony across the street.

The phone dwelled forlorn in the pile of discarded clothes. Raymond retrieved it and flipped it open with practised finesse. Each call he made drained away a bit more of his euphoria. McQuinn was unavailable. Compton didn't answer. Rebecca was again meeting with Horton. Her unflappable secretary handled him so professionally that Raymond suspected something horrendous had happened, pushing her into automatic mode. This was not going as he had planned. Or maybe it was. Right now the decision to oust Compton was probably being made, and Rebecca was reminding Horton that Raymond was the logical one to save everyone's butt.

Too jittery to sit around the suite waiting, he got dressed, set the phone to vibrate discretely instead of ring and slipped it into the inside pocket of his sports coat. Then he went to the gallery. After all, he should be doing something impressive when the appeal for help came. He wandered through the maze, letting the ambience draw him in to the heart of the collection. He was surprised to find Theresa standing before the jaguar statue, her midnight hair shading her face.

She heard his step and looked up. Her face seemed drained of life, pale as the chalk-faced paraders. Her beautiful eyes were glossy with tears. "We would have other children you said." Her voice stuttered with pain. "Many more. As many as I wanted. All these years I wondered why I wasn't able to conceive. You had a vasectomy, didn't you, so there would be no more 'inconvenient pregnancies.'"

Raymond smiled through his panic. What had suddenly made her suspect the truth about their inability to conceive again? He held out his arms and walked toward her. "Darling, you're talking nonsense." When he had finally accepted that the operation was necessary, it had been easy to accomplish. After the abortion Theresa's Catholic-trained guilt reflex had gone on a rampage. She had spent much of the next year and a half at a private clinic in Connecticut, under the care of her own physician for depression. The doctor had refused to tell Raymond much, confidentiality and all that. Mrs Stanton was her patient, she had explained, not Mr Stanton. Ethically she could only tell Raymond what his wife allowed her to, which had been nothing beyond generalities. Raymond had had Rebecca check out the woman's credentials. They were impressive enough that he hadn't worried. He had been glad to have the extra uninterrupted time to devote to his financial goals, so he had sent Theresa roses and trinkets and had stayed





away as she had requested.

Raymond's physician dealt exclusively with executives whose medical conditions influenced the stock market. He and his staff were well paid for their professional discretion. Theresa couldn't possibly have any proof. He could talk his way through this. "Darling, we've discussed the matter before. The doctor told you that the best way for you to get pregnant is not to think about it." If he could get her worked up enough, she would shatter like china. Then he could put her back together as he needed her to be. "Besides," he made his voice soft and sorrowful, "we both know that sometimes — " he let a catch hang in his throat, " — sometimes something can go wrong during an abortion, something that even doctors can't detect."

She backed away from him. "I know that isn't true, *darling*."

A velvet-eyed, dark-skinned boy with a thick patch of cat-black hair peered around the corner from the next room. Raymond saw the figure at the edge of his vision but refused to look directly at him, not wanting to verify what he knew in his gut. It was the boy from outside the jewelry store. If he just kept staring at Theresa, the apparition would go away. A palpitation rattled his chest. He clenched his teeth. Not now!

The vibration echoed in his skull. He pulled the phone from his inside pocket. This would be the cry of bewilderment from a defeated Compton. Despite the bad timing, Raymond wanted this call, he needed this call. He flipped open the rectangle and jabbed the talk button.

Raymond raised the smooth plastic to his ear, feeling the inner electric tingle of data being transferred, as if it were alive. He could almost see Compton, slump-shouldered and hollow-eyed, unable to figure out why his charm and confidence had failed him. He envisioned the young man's skinny

body stepping like a sleepwalker out of the gallery's blanched wall, his bare feet soundlessly marking the wooden floor. Raymond blinked at the image he'd conjured up.

"Jesus," Rebecca whispered, "you didn't tell me the guy was screwed up."

Raymond stared into the black pits that used to hold Compton's eyes. "What?" he managed to croak, more to the delusion in front of him that wavered from filmy transparency to cold flesh than to the voice at his ear.

"Jesus," Rebecca breathed, "he killed himself." Raymond imagined her slouched against the slick, reflective fake marble of the otherwise empty corporate elevator, hunched over the phone, hand cupped to her mouth as if to accumulate privacy like stock options. "Some kind of pills washed down with booze."

No bullet to damage his perfect, smooth temple. No messy blood to stain the silk pajamas. Raymond saw the amber prescription bottle clutched in one hand and the blurred column of the scotch container banded by distinctive sapphire and gold labels dangling from the phantom fingers of the other. Johnny Walker Blue. First class, macho poison. Nothing tacky to embarrass the family.

"Tragic," Rebecca puffed. "It makes me feel guilty."

"Guilty?" Raymond could barely feel the clammy plastic pressed against his cheek. The strength drained from his right arm and he had to support it with the left to keep the phone from slipping. *Guilty*. The sleepwalker, still groggy from gel-caps choked down with expensive alcohol, formed the word back at him with the catacomb in its marzipan face. *You hexed me*, the candy skull mouthed, *with corporate symbols, faxes and rituals. This is my Day of the Dead, and I will not go quietly into the underworld.*

"Horton wants me to fly out right away," Rebecca said. "He thinks Compton's... He thinks this thing with Compton will soften up the opposition."

"Horton turned the project over to you?" Betrayal hit Raymond like a lightning bolt to the nape of the neck, not forsaken loyalty by Rebecca or Horton or anyone — that was business. It was his plan that had deluded him, his arrogance that his empty chair during the tense discussion in the conference room would cement him more firmly in Horton's mind, that his rushing back from a well-deserved vacation in the desert would paint him as a more dramatic and powerful sorcerer when he finally triumphed where his predecessor had been so completely defeated. The secret transmissions, the wireless messages, the detailed instructions like sacred incantations had let him down.

"Raymond," Rebecca said, "I think Horton found out something suspicious about the ownership of Real Illusions."

The lightning bolt spread agony through his head. He had to switch the phone to his left hand. His right arm hung useless at his side. How could Horton know? He never checked on anything himself. Rebecca was the only one, other than Raymond, who had researched the proposed acquisitions. Once Real Illusions had been targeted, Raymond had taken over monitoring it himself, assigning Rebecca to other duties. She must have become curious as to why he was putting so much personal attention into the project. Raymond suddenly understood Rebecca's quiet intimacy. This was not a warning but a confession, a request for absolution. Well, he was in no mood to play Christian priest.

His current disposition was far more pagan. The hallucinated corpse, which at first seemed to symbolize his achieving a higher level of corporate alchemy, now twisted its bleached mask in mockery.

Rebecca understood the silent canon that governed them.



There was no forgetting, no forgiveness, no mercy. From now on Raymond would make certain that everything Rebecca touched crumbled to dust. He would hex her as he had Compton. Only this time there would be no miscalculation.

The phantom circled the empty Johnny Walker bottle at him. Raymond saw the outline of the mouth move but he couldn't decipher the murmur. Drops pelted him. Icy bursts stung the left side of his face. Liquor beads speckled on the varnished floor, reflections from the spotlights turning them to pearls. The phantom rattled the dark orange cylinder and hurled bright gelcaps like casting bones.

Raymond slumped to the floor and was suddenly on his back staring at the chalky ceiling of the gallery. The vision in his right eye turned watery and dissolved. Theresa stood over him, the phone now in her hand. He heard the beep of a connection being broken then a series of three beeps. "Medical emergency," she said. He wanted to laugh. The phantom was beyond the need for an ambulance. It loomed over him as if on stilts. Through its gossamer the anxious face of the old woman was like a creased coconut. She put her hand on the little boy and drew him sideways into the circle of her arms, revealing Lenny Pulaski and Uncle Dwight. Pity marked the juggler's greasepaint.

Theresa, old woman, young boy, Uncle Dwight, Lenny, phantom — they swirled as if he looked at them through the scotch bottle. He closed his eyes against the whirlpool, but it melted through his flesh in commas of primary and monochrome vertigo, forcing him to escape into a black nothingness. For what seemed like an eon, he drifted in a blind world where many hands moved over his body as if it traveled on a conveyor belt past assembly line workers.

Nasty smells and disjointed, unintelligible sounds reached him through an ever-turning wheel of pain and dormant suspension. Finally he opened his eyes to white, feeling as if he had just endured the worst headache of his life. The ceiling that confronted him lacked the uniform creaminess of the art gallery's. Scored into squares, it was peppered with negative images of stars. His vision seemed restricted to one eye, producing a flat image.

This time only his wife, the old woman and the little boy rushed to stare down at him, a minor improvement but he appreciated the reduced number of spectators. Theresa's thick hair was combed straight back and fastened with silver at the nape of her graceful neck. The glow to her skin was unaltered by make-up. She wore a loose denim shirt and faded slacks, as she often had before they started dating and he made it clear that he expected her to maintain a more refined image.

She was flawless, a queen, a goddess. His mind ached for her touch and hungered for her scent. He should have been overwhelmed by the hot rush of an erection, but his body remained numb.

"You're in St Joseph's Hospital," Theresa said. "It's private, run by Franciscan sisters, and very good. You're recovering from a stroke. I explain that every time you seem to be conscious, but the doctor told me I shouldn't expect you to remember anything from one time to the next." She was about to go on with what seemed to be a familiar recitation but instead tilted her head at him.

"Finally, it's really you." She picked up his limp right hand and held it between her own. He saw the motion but experienced it only as a slight change in pressure. He tried to move his fingers in a caress but couldn't tell if he had so much as twitched. His right side seemed to be missing. There was feeling in his left side, but his arm and leg felt too weak to respond. He screamed at Theresa that something was wrong, so very wrong. A ghoulish orderly had stolen away his real

body, leaving his soul homeless. He couldn't hear his own voice, only panic reverberating through his mind.

Theresa didn't react to his silent wail. "With extensive therapy you might regain your speech. That's the first thing you want to know, isn't it. As to the paralysis on your right side, some people recover completely. I suppose you don't plan on settling for anything less, and you're used to getting your own way. But sometimes other people get what they want, despite your lying and your deceit."

"Theresa," the old woman admonished, "true, he is no better than the devil himself, but he is your husband."

"Hush, *Tia*." She took the boy from the old woman's arms. "This is Raymond King Stanton Jr, our son. He's been living in Puerta del Sol with my Aunt Rosa and my family."

Raymond blinked, the only motion he could manage. Each of Theresa's words seemed to be wrapped in its own bunting. He had difficulty freeing them one by one, but her intonation and expression conveyed the message. He absorbed it intuitively. No abortion. His loving, obedient Theresa, how could she have done that to him? This was a lie, a trick to get her hands on the per child allowance specified in the prenuptial agreement.

Theresa smiled gently at the boy, gave him a squeeze, then handed him back to the protection of his great-aunt. "You're named on the birth certificate as the father, of course. When your lawyer and I filed the papers granting me power of attorney over your affairs, at his recommendation I also had very sophisticated DNA matching done. Our son's current financial support and future inheritance are legal and tidy. I'm disappointed that you can't control your facial muscles. I'd like to see your shock. After you think about it awhile, you'll realize how I accomplished a secret pregnancy and delivery. It will be a good mental exercise for you, trying to recall three to four years ago — when you saw me, what I was wearing, did I look fat."

He remembered the days, the months, Theresa had been away from him during her depression. Was it true? He kept telling himself that it couldn't be.

Theresa smoothed a wrinkle from the sheets. "I didn't know that while I was feeling like a demon for deceiving you, you were creating a deception of your own. While I was giving life, you were making sure there would be no other children. Perhaps I could have absolved you for that, canceled one deception with another. I might have even gotten over your trying to convince me that the infertility was my fault. But I can't forgive you for allowing me to hope, for encouraging me to believe that more children were possible when they weren't, not naturally.

"Not seeing little Ray every day, not being able to tuck him into bed every night was agony," Theresa told her husband. "I hoped that when I conceived another child and you imagined holding our new baby in your arms, you would understand why I hadn't gone through with the abortion, and you would welcome our sweet son into your life."

A male doctor entered followed by a female nurse. Raymond didn't recall seeing either of them before, but Theresa obviously knew them and retreated with her aunt and the boy to sagging chairs by the curtained window. Plastic name tags pinned to their pastel lab coats were covered with sticks and loops that Raymond maddeningly tried to decipher, but they made no sense to his short-circuited brain. The pair seemed matched like salt and pepper shakers. They had the polished, sincere aura of soap opera characters and the standard pulse-checking, chart-writing movements to go with it.

"More alert today," the doctor said in a professionally cheery tone, as if his voice coach had instructed him to practise the



line in just that way. "You've suffered a kind of stroke called a cerebral thrombosis, a blood clot in an artery in your brain. When that happens, an area is deprived of oxygen, causing nerve cells to die. As a result, some parts of the body no longer function the way they're suppose to. In your case, you have hemiparesis, a paralysis on one side of your body, your right side, and loss of sight in that eye as well. You also have aphasia, which is a difficulty with language. Obviously you are unable to speak, and you might not be able to understand a word I'm saying either. You probably have some memory loss as well."

He gave Raymond a tooth-whitener-commercial smile. It was too confusing. The man's generic tone and expression leached the meaning from his words.

"The bad news," the doctor said, still beaming, "is that once cells are damaged, they can't be healed and no new ones can be generated. The good news is that with therapy other parts of your brain can be trained to take over the lost functions. I won't pretend that it will be easy, but full recovery is possible."

Possible. Raymond concentrated on possible. That's what Theresa thought about having a child. That's what Compton thought about closing the deal in LA. But Raymond had made sure that neither one would happen. Was this Theresa's revenge, to dangle an impossible possible in front of him and let him struggle toward it as he had done to her?

He had thought Theresa incapable of such malicious cunning, yet a three-year-old boy who was supposed to have never been born sat on his wife's lap and leaned against her breast. If the boy was not his son, then she lied now. If the boy was his son, then to protect the child, she had created an elaborate invention and had gotten others, including medical staff — or people who seemed to be medical staff — to embellish it. A stone-cold fear wrapped around Raymond like a fist. Who was real and who masqueraded as something else?

He suddenly didn't know what his wife was capable of doing. She had control of his money and his life. He had nothing but a slack, unresponsive body and a mind that every second threatened to slip away from him.

The freezing fist tightened. Oh, how he wanted another life, any life that was not this one.

The nurse — if she was a nurse — oozed encouraging sounds, then the matched medical set left, asking Mrs Stanton to step outside with them for a moment if she would. *Tia Rosa*, Aunt Rosa, shuffled close to Raymond's bedside.

"Perhaps you are feeling that you want to die," *Tia Rosa* said in what sounded like a variation of a thick Spanish accent. She wagged a plump, stubby finger at him. "Theresa didn't see your ghosts, but I did. The clown-man I knew well when he was alive. He has much he wants to tell you, but he doesn't think you'll understand, and so he tries to at least make you laugh. The blond boy has a very sweet soul. He was immediately fond of little Ray and followed him like a puppy. I would be pleased if he visited again, although I don't think he'll come next year. I shouldn't tell you this, I have no reason to ease your soul, but the blond boy forgives you. He said so to you himself, but you're not a good listener. Ah, maybe that will change now."

Her wrinkled face tensed into a frown and she shook her head. "The other one though, the bottle waver, he is very bad. He'll return and return again until this matter between the two of you is reconciled. I warn you, it must be settled here, on this earth. If you go with such a burden into death, it will never be resolved. For eternity, the two of you will reign the horror of your unrepentant souls upon one another. No.

You must not tell yourself to die."

She ran a hand across his body a foot above the covers, as if scanning his vital organs. "The angry spirit has placed this paralysis on you. Doctors know so much, yet so little. You'll not recover unless you're freed from this witchery." She sighed, long and high like wind tangled in tree branches. "It will be difficult, very difficult. Fortunately, my sisters and brothers and I learned well from our grandmother. For you, we do nothing. For our darling Theresa and her children we'll move stars if we must. Yes, I said children." She sang, "Doctors know so much, yet so little." She laughed deeply, so that it rocked her ample flesh. "I discovered your deception. Why else would the teas and potions I sent to my darling Theresa not work? I did not tell her until the new pregnancy was done, so at least she would have some joy to soften her husband's betrayal. She carries a girl, a child conceived through what you would consider magic."

*Tia Rosa* leaned close to him. "And it can be done again." She pulled back and gazed at him smugly. "You are no longer in a high metal tower far away. You are here now, low to the land, where a little life force can be coaxed past a surgeon's snipping. My precious niece will have all the children she wishes." She patted him halfway down his body where his genitals nestled dormant between his legs. Raymond felt an arousing jolt.

An image of the skull-headed apparition leapt into his thoughts. Distorted air swam toward him as the hallucination menacingly shoved the drained liquor bottle at his face. This was hocus-pocus nonsense, he told himself. He conjured up the same hot-ice resolve that had surged through him when Rebecca revealed her own conspiracy.

The old hag was crazy, her only magic founded in psychological manipulation. Right now he couldn't explain how she knew about the juggler and the boy who looked like Lenny Pulaski and the apparition of suicidal Compton, but it was hard for him to think straight. With a little time he could reason it out.

How long had he vegetated semiconscious on antiseptic sheets? Had the Real Illusions deal gone through without him? He had to finalize arrangements for the Stanton Collection. He needed his phone. He craved the dance of stock quotes across the tiny rectangle of an LCD screen. The surroundings reminded him that there was a prospectus of a medical equipment company he wanted his broker to fax to him. That was reality, not this mystical nonsense of ghosts, masquerades and impossible children.

He believed with all his strength that the juggler and Lenny Pulaski and the nightmare in the gallery were brought on by the coming stroke. He willed himself to accept no other explanation.

He controlled his own life. He could die if he wanted to without fear that a vengeful spirit waited to share hell with him. He could live if he wanted to. The paralysis was not ghost-induced, and he didn't need a witch to help him move his right side and learn to read and speak again. He did not have a child and never would. A marzipan wraith would not visit him on the Third Day of the Dead or any other day.

Through the open door, Raymond could see Theresa washed with light, listening to the soap opera doctor, her face calm and accepting. She put a hand to the small of her back and massaged the muscles. The denim shirt pulled against her abdomen, and Raymond saw the bulge of pregnancy.

Danith McPherson has sold fiction to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *Full Spectrum 4*, *Amazing Stories*, *Space and Time*, *Distant Journeys*, *The Fractal*, *Sozoryoku*, *Forbidden Lines* and other publications.



# Burma

ANTONY MANN

# Skyway



**By the time Wellings could get away it was after eight, and** nine before he stood on his front doorstep in darkness, searching for his keys. Somehow they ended up in a different pocket every time. It was grim out in suburban London. Cold January sleet was being swept before a colder wind, but Wellings paused as he finally retrieved his door key and smiled before twisting it in the keyhole. It had been a good meeting today, a successful debriefing.

Once inside the modern terrace he hit the lights. He had dumped his briefcase in the kitchen and walked the length of the hall before he realised something was wrong. In the sunken living room, the telescreen flickered. Sounds of rain and machinery emanated from the hidden speakers. But Wellings lived alone, and he never left it on.

From where he stood on the landing he could see the flat wallscreen clearly. The picture was well defined but unsteady, jerking like amateur handcam footage; and it appeared the video had been shot through foliage. It had the feel of a documentary. It was daytime, perhaps late afternoon. Half a mile distant was a backdrop of thick, tropical rainforest. The foreground had been denuded and become a great flat mud-pile. It was raining, belting down.

Wellings kept watching, momentarily mesmerised. The camera panned across from a conglomeration of busy earth-moving equipment to zoom in on three figures in the distance. A man knelt on the ground, head bowed, hands tied behind his back. Two others, in uniform, stood over him. Each had a rifle. One fired.

The kneeling figure lurched forward, face down into the mud. The crack of the shot arrived a moment later. The second soldier kicked the body where it lay, then both men began to walk off. The camera followed them for a few seconds before zooming out and panning rapidly left, and then Wellings knew what he saw.

The near-completed staging point of the Burma Skyway rose mushroom-like above and surrounded on three sides by the sea of rainforest. Workmen milled around its base like so many thousands of ants, manning lifters and unloading truck containers onto Tarmac under the watchful eyes of the guards. Invisible inside the great bulbous grey structure were as many workers again, fitting out the interior. The luxury hotel with gymnasium and conference facilities, the shopping concourse, the restaurants and bars were all nearing completion. The one major task that remained was the reclaiming and landscaping of the mudflat.

Wellings felt an artificial sense of *deja vu*. He had been at the Skyway only yesterday — not down in the mud with the toiling horde, but skimming overhead in one of the new Drelcorp Skyriders, partaking of smoked salmon and champagne alongside officials from the ruling military junta. It was set to be one of the big tourist attractions of the 2030s: what better way to see a quaint, backward country like Burma than in a Skyrider Airbus, tarrying as you pleased in any of the eight Skyway Hotels? And who better to provide the infrastructure than Drelcorp-Transworld?

Wellings sensed movement behind him in the hallway. He felt the prick in his neck before he could turn. In an instant his mind had clouded and dizziness descended, but strong hands held him under the arms as his legs gave way. The wallscreen darkened, along with everything else.

“So what did you think of the little film, David William?”

Wellings heard the voice before he saw the speaker, but then his eyes snapped open. He was no longer in the hall. He sat, or rather, had *been* sat, in the blue leather armchair in his living room, facing towards the wallscreen. It was blank





now. His jacket had been removed, but he still wore his suit trousers and shirt. He could feel a band of cool sweaty material, possibly plastic, pressing around his neck almost too tightly for comfort. He could move his head back, but not forward. His wrists had been secured to the arms of the chair with dull silver gaffer tape. He assumed it was the same which kept his ankles from moving.

The man who had spoken stood before him in dirty white trainers, a black jumper and dark jeans. Wellings, who not so long ago had hit forty-seven, found it hard these days to tell the ages of younger people, but he guessed the man to be between twenty-five and thirty. He was tall and slim, and narrow of face, and wore a neatly clipped goatee but no moustache. His head was shaven almost to the scalp.

"A friend of ours smuggled the footage out of Burma a few weeks ago." It was not the man who had spoken this time. This second voice had come from the right. Wellings was able to turn his head. He did so, and saw the woman. She had taken one of the Braunhof designer chairs from the kitchen and sat eight feet away, looking at him. The Braunhof was an elegant piece of work: stainless steel frame with a plexglass back and seat. They had cost Wellings a fortune. "She's a dead friend, now. It's dangerous to try to get unsanctioned information out of Burma. As you're no doubt aware."

She sat in front of a bank of machines that, apart from a computer terminal and screen, Wellings did not recognise. They were the only thing changed about the living room. The sterling silver candlesticks on the mantel, valuable china pieces locked behind the shiny glass windows of a tall oak cabinet, these had not been disturbed. There were his oil paintings, too, grouped together on one wall, three unframed abstracts out of the series he'd been working on, all of them

studies in blue. Technically unsophisticated, they were nonetheless saturated with a heaviness of spirit. He didn't doubt they told something about him. Yet it was an exhibition of himself for himself, since few people came calling these days.

The woman was older than the man, by ten years or more. From the voice, she was educated, middle-class, like Wellings himself. She was dressed in a faded green sloppy jo and grey tracksuit bottoms. In one way, she had let herself go: it was evident that she cared little for her appearance. Her hair was long and unkempt, and prematurely greying. She wore no make-up. But Wellings still found her attractive. There was something earthy about her, an aura of substance and groundedness. Wellings could imagine her at a potter's wheel, hands covered in wet clay, in a shed at the back of a small suburban tract. She made him feel oddly self-conscious about his own appearance. Too much drinking had made him overweight, and he was losing his hair.

"I don't remember ordering a new entertainment system," he said. The computer and monitor had been set up on a portable workstation, but the other machines, slim black boxes that might have been recording equipment, were stacked on the carpet. The computer screen flickered as, turning intermittently to her task, the woman tapped at the keyboard.

"Nice to see you haven't lost your sense of humour, David William," said the man, still standing in front of him. It was odd to hear a stranger voicing his forenames like that, in his own house, as though the man were not an intruder, a kidnapper, but one of the family. If there had been a family any more.

"You know my name. You obviously know what I do for a living. Who sent you? Maxtant Industries? Hewitt International?"



The man and the woman exchanged smiles.

"He thinks we're spies." Still smiling, the man rolled his eyes. His voice was gentle, also educated, but not as rich or strong as the woman's. "Corporate goons."

"He's admirably calm," the woman replied.

"He's been trained for such a contingency," said the man. "Name, rank and credit card number, David William?"

The man was right. Drelcorp-Transworld was as prone to industrial espionage as the next company — with their catalogue of high-profile global operations, possibly more so. All Drelcorp field executives were given training against the chance of corporate abduction. It didn't mean Wellings wasn't afraid. He was. But for the moment he was keeping it under control. He regarded the pair. Of course, just because they denied it, didn't make it not so, but if they really weren't the competition...

"So who are you?" Wellings asked.

"I'm Judd, and this is Andrella."

The woman grimaced at the mention of her name. "My parents flirted with the New Age before they found the stock market," she said, somewhat sourly. "I've always been meaning to change it." She nodded to Judd as she picked up a fine mesh metallic net the size of a table napkin. It appeared to be wired into the uppermost black box via a long lead. "We're ready for initial calibration."

"You're ecos!" said Wellings.

"He's smart," said Andrella.

"He can't be that smart," said Judd, "or he wouldn't be tied to a chair in his own living room." He collected the mesh from her and walked across behind the blue leather chair. Wellings tried not to flinch as Judd fitted the net to his scalp, pulling it tight and clipping it at the back of his neck. It was soft like a spider's web, but cool. The touch of it sent a shudder down his spine.

"What's that?" Wellings's voice faltered slightly for the first time.

"It's a very sensitive piece of equipment, that's what."

Human rights ecos had been banging on about Burma for decades now. A lot of it had started with Aung San Suu Kyi, the woman whom the people of Burma had selected to govern them in 1990. The junta had deselected her without ado. She had died in prison in 2017, but not before giving birth to a little Aung San, who now must have been almost twenty, and who also remained in captivity. It was a dynasty of the democratic urge, destined to fail. The Western powers had never seen fit to intervene. After all, where was the economic benefit?

Ecos had never had a lot of monetary clout, since they seemed to have a set against most of the best ways to make money, but they had always had an abundance of media savvy. They were forever devising ingenious ploys and gambits to get the attention of the world.

"Is this some sort of publicity stunt?" Wellings asked.

"Well, no, I wouldn't call it a stunt, not really..." Judd's voice came from behind.

"Because if it is, I don't know what you intend to achieve," Wellings continued. "You can't induce me to speak out against the Skyway project."

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Judd. He stepped around the chair quickly, examining the scalp netting like a barber checking his cut. "It's ready," he said to Andrella. He leaned in and adjusted the netting one last time. "There'll be a slight tension inside your head, David William, but it won't hurt."

Andrella flicked a switch, and LEDs came on across the stack of machines. There was a barely noticeable increase in the ambient hum of the house. Wellings jerked in his chair,

reacting against the curious new sensation. Judd had not lied: there was no pain, but it felt to him as though his brain was all skin, being pulled tight. It must have been an illusion, caused by some sort of pressure against or through his skull — he knew there were no nerve endings in the brain — yet it was uncomfortable. He tried to lift his hands to his head reflexively, but the tape held his arms fast.

Numeric readings began to appear on the computer screen in quick succession. Andrella glanced at them, nodded in satisfaction, and stood, stretching her arms and yawning. It irritated Wellings, how relaxed the pair of them were, how cocksure. Judd had plonked himself down on the sofa to the left, and now Andrella sat cross-legged on the carpet at Judd's feet and swept the hair away from her eyes.

"The smarmy swami," Wellings muttered to himself, but not softly enough. Andrella heard him.

"You don't have much time for ecos, do you?" she said.

"About as much as they have for me. And you two aren't doing a lot for the general reputation." He glanced at the computer screen. Rows of numbers cascaded down the page. "What are those read-outs for? Just what is it that you want?"

"To start with, we'd like to ask you some questions."

"About what?"

"Various things. For instance, when did your wife die?"

Now there was pain — not physical, but deep in his breast, the same that he always felt when he was forced to confront Laura's death. The hurt of his loss. Time didn't seem to be healing it, as proverbially he'd been led to believe it would. That had been a cheat, an adult's version of being lied to about Santa Claus. Even so, he'd never been tempted by the ideals and aims of the grief industry. He regarded himself as different to those who flaunted their tragedies at the behest of whatever infonews franchise shoved a camera in their face. He thought of it as Grief TV: the endless press conferences and talk shows littered with bereft parents and spouses bewailing their drowned or murdered loved ones. These poor saps appeared to labour under the illusion that they had an obligation to the world at large to exhibit their distress, that they couldn't simply shut the front door and blind the cameras' cold eyes. And all the better if in their display they proclaimed for all to hear that their lives had been ruined. Wellings had chosen to be private in his grief; and he knew that life would go on. Even if without her it was diminished beyond his understanding, it remained his life.

He was angry that this woman in his house had stirred memories, like this, out of the blue. He couldn't keep it from his voice. "You know all about me," he said savagely. "You should know that too."

"You're right. We know," said Judd. "Frankly, we don't care if you answer or not. But we still have to ask you. The simulator needs to record your reactions."

Wellings looked once more towards the stack of machines.

"It's a Kaldon 7," said Andrella. "Something nice and new."

"An exciting piece of kit," Judd nodded enthusiastically. "We have high hopes for it."

Wellings knew of the Kaldon line. They were whole-sense virtual space systems, developed by Virtua Industries. Drelcorp-Transworld had at one point investigated the possibility of using the Kaldons in their advanced training strands. But that had been the Kaldon 5, and there had been problems: reality integration had been patchy and unpredictable, and there had been side-effects. Such as psychosis.

"Virtua discontinued the Kaldons after the 5th generation," said Wellings.

"That's true, *Virtua* did. But the Kaldons were actually developed by deep-cover eco placements in the Virtua labs,"





said the woman. "They built defects into the Kaldon 5 that not even the pond-scum at Virtua Distribution could find a way to sneak past the regulators. And it was useless as a brainwashing or torture device, so the military didn't bite. But that was four years ago. The latest Kaldons appear not to have any of the weaknesses of their predecessors. Virtua don't know that, however, since they don't know the new models exist."

"This is a 7th-gen Kaldon?" said Wellings. "Built covertly by ecos working *inside* Virtua? You'll forgive me if I don't believe you."

"We're not all fringe folk, you know," said Andrella. "You'd be surprised, some of the places ecos have infiltrated over the last few decades."

"We are indeed a broad church these days," Judd said. "But only out of necessity. If enough people are shunted off to the margins, some of them start to wonder why, and how they might find their way back onto the middle of the page. Where the history is written."

"If that really is a Kaldon 7, it's worth a lot of money," said Wellings.

"Oh, it's worth a lot more than money," said Judd. "Now tell us, David William. How did your wife die?"

An image came to him then, unbidden, of Laura on their wedding day in 2013, wearing her daisy blue dress; and of the quiet happiness in her eyes that had been reflected in his own. She had never been demonstrative. The marriage had been childless, not through choice. In this way they were a typical modern couple, with his sperm count too low to conceive. They had decided against artificial means. She had died three years ago in the Leicester Square massacre. It was how most Londoners remembered 2029: for the seven hundred

and twelve late shoppers who had perished in the Christmas Eve bomb blast in London's West End that had shown the latest Northern Ireland peace process for what it was: a dam of twigs and mud built to stop a river of hate.

"Some bomb, that," said Judd, reading the look on Wellings's face.

"You're an unpleasant young man," said Wellings.

"Really, I'm not that bad once you get to know me. Threw yourself into your work after that, did you?"

"For a while."

"And how many deaths do you suppose *that* led to?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Wellings.

"Come now. You saw the film. The slave being killed."

"They're not slaves. They might be poor, but Burma's a poor country. The money that Drelcorp brings in will help the economy and in the end the people will benefit from that."

"The mantra of the corporate accomplice," said Andrella.

"You know that the people of Burma will never see any of that money. It will all go straight into the pockets of the ruling junta, just as it always does."

"What was it like, David William," asked Judd, "supping with Burma's managing directors? Do good business, huh?"

"And meanwhile," Andrella went on, "when the workers get old and can't lift a shovel any more, they're shot."

"Utter nonsense," said Wellings. "That man was most likely a criminal."

"You mean a dissident, don't you?" she said. "Or probably just some bone-weary old man who was sick of working sixteen hours a day on a subsistence diet."

"Tried, sentenced and executed in the highest court in the land," said Judd derisively. "On the mud flats beneath the Burma Skyway."



Wellings shook his head and sighed. The eco propaganda machine could certainly churn out some outlandish material. The Burmese junta might have been guilty of human rights misdemeanours in the past, but there had never been anything to approach the Balkan or Cambodian genocides. And even if the so-called democrats in Burma could ever convince the Western governments to back them against the junta, would they really be so different in the long run? He doubted it. People's champions had a habit of quickly forgetting the people once they grasped the reins of power. While he had been talking, it had drifted into the background, but now he noticed again the odd pulling sensation coming from within his head. Patterns of numbers still dropped off the bottom of the monitor. He said, "Your argument would be just that little bit more convincing if you hadn't put it to me after breaking into my house and abducting me."

"How else could we get a captive audience?" Judd smirked at his feeble joke.

"You know what always amazes me?" Andrella was talking to Judd now, as though Wellings wasn't there. "I used to think that it had to be a front, a mask they were hiding behind, somehow denying to themselves the truth, despite all the evidence. But now I realise, they actually do believe the corporate line. They *are* the line. They're where the power of the corporations stems from. The grassroots faithful. Sometimes I think it's genetic."

"A predisposition towards the corporate way," nodded Judd. "Wow. Scary." He turned his attention back to Wellings, "So you took up painting. After she died."

At first, he *had* thrown himself into his work. The Skyway project was already up and running, and Wellings had made sure he was transferred onto it. But the trips had not helped as he had hoped they would. It had been one thing to get away, to get out of the house, London, out of the country, but another altogether to come back.

By accident, he had found painting again, or perhaps he had been drawn back to it subconsciously. In high school, he had been useful with a palette and brush. He had assumed that any activity he took up would only serve to divert him from his grief, but he had found that over the months — now years — his art, for what it was worth, had become an *expression* of it.

Judd waved a hand at the wall behind where the three abstracts hung. At a stretch, all might have been depictions of the same person or thing, in white, black and red, yet on each canvas heavy slashes of deep blue predominated over detail in a tangle of line and sweep of curve. "They're raw, but very good." Judd seemed to mean it. "Very moving."

"You have a lot of talent," said Andrella.

"It's just a pity, isn't it?" said Wellings.

"What's that?"

"The wellspring of my inspiration."

Somewhere in the workings of the Kaldon 7, a beeper began to sound. Andrella got to her feet and crossed to the machine. She pressed a button and the high-pitched noise ceased. She turned to Wellings with a cool smile. "I think we're ready for a run-through."

She flicked a switch.

Out of static came the rain, heavy and incessant. Wellings could see it and feel it, could hear it. He even smelled it as it drummed down, a rich and cloying organic odour rising off the mudflats. His clothes were saturated in seconds. Water ran down his face and neck in rivulets. Yet he knew it was not truly rain. There was no physical indication that it might not be, but each of his senses, while acknowledging the

environment in which he found himself, was also telling him that it was not real. The whole added up to a sensation of separateness, as though he were a visitor in his own body, experiencing its life remotely. He could understand why the early Kaldons had failed: this split in his consciousness, the apparent perfection of the simulation combined with the recognition that it *was* a simulation, had definite psychotic overtones.

The staging point of the Burma Skyway dominated the vista. He had not seen it from the ground before, only from the window of a Drelcorp Sky rider. Looking up at it now, four hundred metres across the mudplain, its grandeur sent a shiver down his spine. It was an impressive sight. The top of its broad grey dome, set on the narrower supporting structure, was all of five hundred feet from the ground. Hazy through the sheet rain, he could discern the shapes of men labouring in the wide Airbus ports high up in the dome's base. He watched as work squads sorted and moved materials on the Tarmac near the main ground entrance. He was wondering if he should approach the building, see what might happen if he made an attempt to engage someone in communication, when to the left, a hundred metres away, he spotted a pair of armed sentries patrolling where the mudflats met with the encircling rainforest. They had not seen him, but instinctively he ducked to the ground in fear. Mud oozed between his fingers as he crouched down, trying to make himself small on the wide and featureless expanse. Then, he began to laugh. The guards had not seen him because they could not see him. He wasn't really in Burma. This was a simulation.

"David William?" The voice was loud, and it shocked him. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, both inside his head and out. It was Judd's voice. "We're pulling you out now."

"That was incredible," said Wellings excitedly from his chair. Andrella sat at the computer, watching the monitor as it displayed new data.

"You enjoyed that?" Judd frowned. He stood behind Andrella, looking over her shoulder at the read-out.

"No, well, not *enjoyed*, I wouldn't go that far," Wellings said, "but it was amazingly..."

"Real?"

"Yes, but at the same time, not real. I felt split between what I was experiencing and...myself. I know it sounds crazy."

"It's not crazy," said Judd. "It's a very accurate description of the process. Your psyche happens to be stable, so it's most likely that you wouldn't have experienced any long-term problems from such a brief episode. Maybe the odd flashback, partial sensory disorientation, that kind of thing. But prolonged exposure always leads to permanent psychosis."

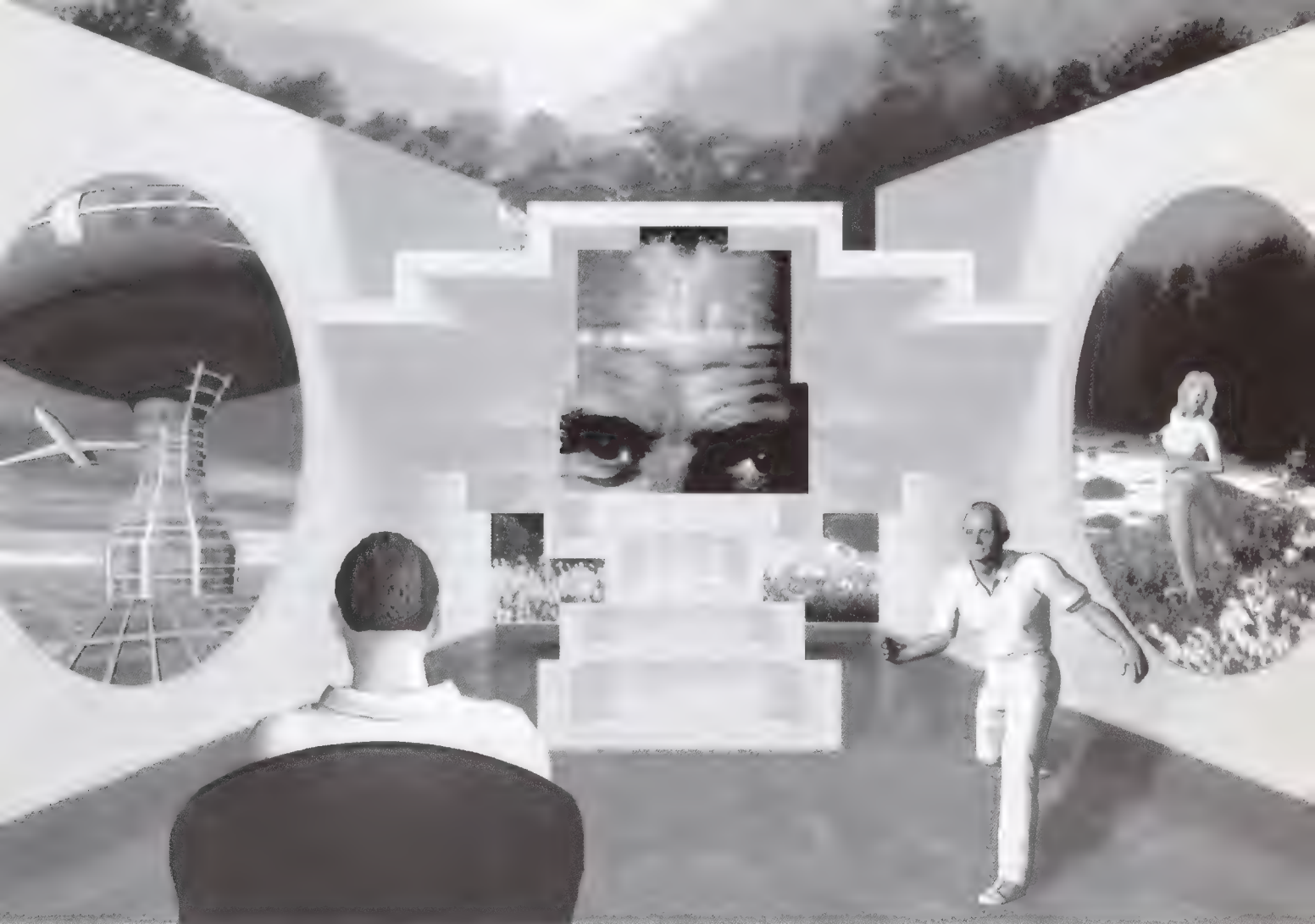
"I don't understand." Wellings was suddenly very aware of his bonds. He tried to make a joke of it, but it didn't sound convincing, "What do you intend to do? Send me insane?"

"No, of course not. What would be the point in that? What you just experienced was the *limit* of the Kaldon 5. This is the Kaldon 7. It's recalibrating the reality field now for total interactive immersion, based on the neural data it collected while you were inside. There'll be no reality conflict, hence, no potential for psychosis."

"But what about the initial structuring of this reality field, as you call it? I don't see how the machine could have gathered enough information to create it. I've only been sitting here for half an hour."

"We programmed it with a template beforehand," said Andrella. "The basic physical environment and inherent actions. Data about you. However, it needs your emotional input to





fill out the field. To make it...real."

"Hence the questions about Laura," nodded Wellings. "But the voice. I heard Judd's voice at the end of the simulation."

"We can feed whatever data we like directly into the field, either live or recorded. We can create images, smells, sounds. You name it. You recognised Judd's voice because you were in split-reality, the Kaldon 5 mode. If it had been total immersion, you wouldn't have."

"But I'd still have heard it. Coming from the mouth of one of the guards, possibly?"

"Possibly."

"This is fantastic," Wellings was animated. "Do you appreciate what you've got here?"

"We think so," said Judd flatly.

"The applications are almost limitless. I can arrange for Drelcorp to buy this technology from you for more money than you could possibly ever spend. You'll be free to use the proceeds to fund whatever eco projects you like. And I'll make sure that nobody knows about the Virtua connection. Or even that you kidnapped me. You'll be safe, and rich enough to pursue your aims."

"And Drelcorp will have the Kaldon 7," said Andrella.

"Is that such a terrible prospect?" asked Wellings. "Drelcorp does a lot of good works all over the world. We sponsor children's charities and such like. We're really not the bad guys."

"I can see it now," said Andrella. "A Kaldon 7 for every Burmese slave labourer, to make their last years more bearable. Why, you could organise it so they believe they're digging ditches on the French Riviera, not in the hellhole they're accustomed to."

"Well, that's hardly likely to happen," said Wellings, "but..."

"The thing being, David William," Judd interrupted, "we

don't believe you. You don't have the power to broker a deal like that for us. And if you did, then, frankly, you wouldn't offer it sincerely. In preparation for this, we studied your life history with such enthusiasm that we probably know you better than you know yourself. We know you're not a bad man. But you do work for a bad corporation. And that's more than enough. I'm sorry."

The Kaldon 7 beeped again. "Ready for total immersion," said Andrella.

"So what is all this?" Wellings was irritated. The ecos were so dogmatic. He should have known it would be useless to argue with them. "What are you trying to do? Convert me to your cause with an appeal to my sentimental side, some kind of half-baked protest?"

"Protests still have their place," said Judd, "but you're right, these days it's a small one. Publicity raises the profile of an issue, yet it never substantially changes anything. Governments act according to the wishes of the multinationals."

"It's a fabulous arrangement," said Andrella drily. "The corporations act in silence, while the governments talk a lot yet do nothing."

Judd went on bitterly: "Sometimes they'll notice us pathetic ecos barking in the corner and throw us a bone to keep us quiet for a while. They'll enact a new piece of antipollution legislation, for instance, which is barely enforced and systematically flouted. Or they might convene a committee to examine the issues surrounding arms sales, but it will be stacked with corporate placemen and dissolve into nothingness a year or two later, leaving behind an impenetrable thousand page report which makes vague recommendations that will never be acted upon. No, protests are the old way. Protests are for amateurs. Some of us have started to take our work a little



more seriously than that."

"I don't understand," said Wellings.

"I think you do," said Judd.

And then, he did. Why they had kept nothing from him: their names, the origin of the Kaldon 7, the extent of eco-infiltration into corporate and government institutions.

"Don't do it," he said.

"But what are you losing? She's dead, David William, and all you have left are the hours you devote to sustaining an oppressive regime which treats its people like animals. And your art." Judd walked across the living room to the far wall. He stood in front of the abstract paintings. "These are the best of you, here. Ah, what potential you have, to create rather than destroy! It's for that reason alone that we organised a little extra surprise for you. A nice surprise. Call it compensation, if you like." He flashed Wellings an ugly grin. "We didn't *have* to do that."

"You arrogant bastard!" Wellings shouted. He was straining at his bonds now, rocking back in the chair. He could feel the metallic net, tight around his head. "This is pointless, utterly pointless!"

"Not as pointless as a half-baked protest," said Andrella. As her hand reached for the switch, Judd turned back to the paintings, examining them closely.

"You know," he said, "if you look carefully, you can almost see her face."

The rain hammered down out of a featureless grey sky. The heat was tropical. Behind them, as they ran clumsily through the ankle-deep mud, the staging point of the Burma Skyway slowly receded. Another bullet whistled by; the shot rang out. The patrol was gaining on them. It had been a crazy idea, to attempt to escape, but what sort of a life had it been, slowly being worked to death for the greater glory of the junta? Laura was running beside him, keeping up, but he could tell from her laboured breathing that she was tiring. The edge of the forest was still two hundred metres away. Then, she stumbled, and as he stopped to drag her up, he saw in her eyes the realisation that they were not going to make it. The shouts of the guards were loud. They were close now. He sank to his knees in the mud, and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her and holding tight. Better that they go together.

As the bullets ripped through them, he imagined that he heard a man's voice close by, a voice he did not recognise.

"Damn shame, David William," it said. "Damn shame."

Then it was gone, and the rain had stopped.

Antony Mann won the 1999 CWA/The Macallan Short Story Dagger for 'Taking Care of Frank', which was published in *Crimewave*. This is his second story for TTA. The first was the darkly comic 'Vault' in TTA20.

## BEYOND THE DIAL

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### The Dodo Takes On The Scientists

Everybody's shouting just to be heard these days. Mere television shows are marketed as 'events'. A cross on a ballot paper is 'the most important decision of the decade'. Such hyperbole extends both upwards and downwards. Every fruit and vegetable on sale in Roman Road, my local market (model for Walford Market in *Eastenders*), is "Best tomato! Lovely mush! Best potatoes!" Somebody somewhere must be flogging second best lemons but no one dares admit it.

Maybe this is the simple reason for the apparent decline in scientific rigour. Or maybe it's something else, a cloud of millennialism cloaking researchers' better judgement.

I believe that our technologically advanced lifestyle has contributed to global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. However, the disastrous effects of CFCs, CO<sub>2</sub> and CITV are not dramatically immediate enough for a science that nowadays seems to be attempting to compete with trashy summer blockbusters. We've got to have instantaneous disasters because the public apparently can't grasp attrition and entropic decay. It's all about sensationalist science. Presented with MTV style editing like a rollercoaster ride along brightly coloured 3D computer projections.

Those groovy guys with the lab coats and glasses have been seeking to scare us with a brand new catastrophe every year or so. They've already tried warning us that we're in a lull between Ice Ages but everybody reckons they could see a glacier coming and outrun it, even if that means finally moving southwards towards the dreaded closer European integration. Next up was the suddenly fashionable suggestion that a meteor is going to crash land and wipe out all life on Earth...well, there's a *possibility* it could happen within the next 50,000 years. Frankly, as self-appointed guardians of this fragile planet, if our spy satellites and missiles can't detect and destroy this space invader before it plunges into the Pacific, we deserve to go the way of the dinosaurs. Not that it's ever been proved that a plunging fireball and resultant nuclear winter did actually wipe out the great saurians. It's just a now Disneyfied theory. Fossil records seem abrupt to those who deal in millions of years but half an inch of sediment takes longer to accumulate than the whole span of human civilisation.

The next unavoidable natural disaster is, apparently, lurking on the Canary Island of La Palma whose volcano will erupt and plunge the westward side of the isle into the Atlantic thus causing a 500-foot tidal wave which will swamp the whole eastern side of North America. This is all delivered in the usual 'Your hamster has just died' gloomily serious tone and accompanied by a bunch of whizz-bang computer graphics. You know, the type you see in a shampoo ad. Pay attention, here comes the scary bit.

But who's to say the whole island will crumble at once and thus bear out this apocalyptic scenario? Soothsaying scientists are duly wheeled on to predict calamity but why is there hardly ever anyone offering a contrary view and saying hang on, this is just wild conjecture or let's not forget that there are a whole heap of other imponderable factors in the real world which can't always be properly anticipated in pixels or glorified water troughs. Inertia. Resistance. Diminishing returns...

All these programmes actually do is give Mrs Dodo nightmares in which she conjures up a duvet tsunami! I mean, come on, is Chaos Theory really so smart? A butterfly flaps its wings in one hemisphere and causes a hurricane on the stock market in another hemisphere? Is it really that simple to effect such a change? Still, exploding something as small as a couple of atoms can have quite a dramatic effect...

Maybe I'm being deliberately cynical (so what's new?) and should be properly concerned that the American Eastern sea-





# THE DODO HAS LANDED

board could be so suddenly engulfed by a natural catastrophe. Aside from the loss of life, homes and livelihoods, if Wall Street was flooded it would cause a meltdown in the world's economy which would make the 1929 Stock Market Crash seem like a piss in the ocean by comparison. I've got the odd Pep, Isa and Tessa — no, they're not the names of ex-girlfriends — so I ought to be quaking in my boots. I've seen at first hand the damage waves can do. This last Autumn, I visited Happisburgh on the East Anglian coastline where the sea defences have failed and the cliff approach road ends abruptly because one after another the dwellings and holiday homes are being swept into the North Sea along with the clay and sandstone cliffs supporting them. Rising sea levels and ongoing coastal erosion are wreaking small scale but demonstrable havoc in this town famed for its pretty red and white lighthouse and unusually pronounced name (it's 'Haze-Boro'). The damage here is *actual* not conjectural. And yet...it's that old Route 66 versus the A148 conundrum. A potential — not to say, mythical — tidal wave engulfing New York is *ipso facto* a sexier prospect than a neap tide battering Norfolk. Hollywood says so.

OK, so I haven't formally studied science beyond 'O' Level but, hey, I keep abreast of things and consider myself an educated, rational man. But so much of what's presented to the popular gaze as science fact is only some berk's conjecture at best, unprovable theory at worst. Science is trying to be sexy, trying to lose its 'only for the nerds' reputation. Fair enough. But in so doing it's in danger of losing thoroughness and, can I say, integrity? No, maybe not: science has never had any morals.

So what's the next sensationalist scare? Probably that the magnetic poles are about to reverse and all our mobile phone transmitters will collapse. Great news, I say.

Science should concentrate on the factual, the provable, the likely; not some millennialist wish-fulfilment. Even though sf has predicted many aspects of our present and visible near-future — space shuttle, computers, robots, wall to wall TV, transplants, cloning, etc — that doesn't mean the process should be reversed and because we're now living in a science fiction world all ideas should be represented as almost fact.

To echo the rhythm of that old Pink Floyd song: 'Hey! Science! Leave fiction alone!'

## The Dodo Answers His Critics

For those of you who see beyond the surface or have been with me since the first column, my apologies if the following

seems obvious or superfluous. However, I felt it necessary to explain a few pertinent facts.

Why 'the dodo'? It's a pertinent symbol of something we've lost or let die. 'Rosebud' as Citizen Kane would say. 'Obsession' as Calvin Klein later said.

I've been labelled as a 'reactionary old fart'. And there was me thinking I was operating from a Marxist dialectic of holding everything up to question! 'Reactionary'? — in the sense that I am often *reacting*. 'Old'? — I've not quite gone to seed yet, folks. 'Fart'? — well, we all need to keep up our fibre intake.

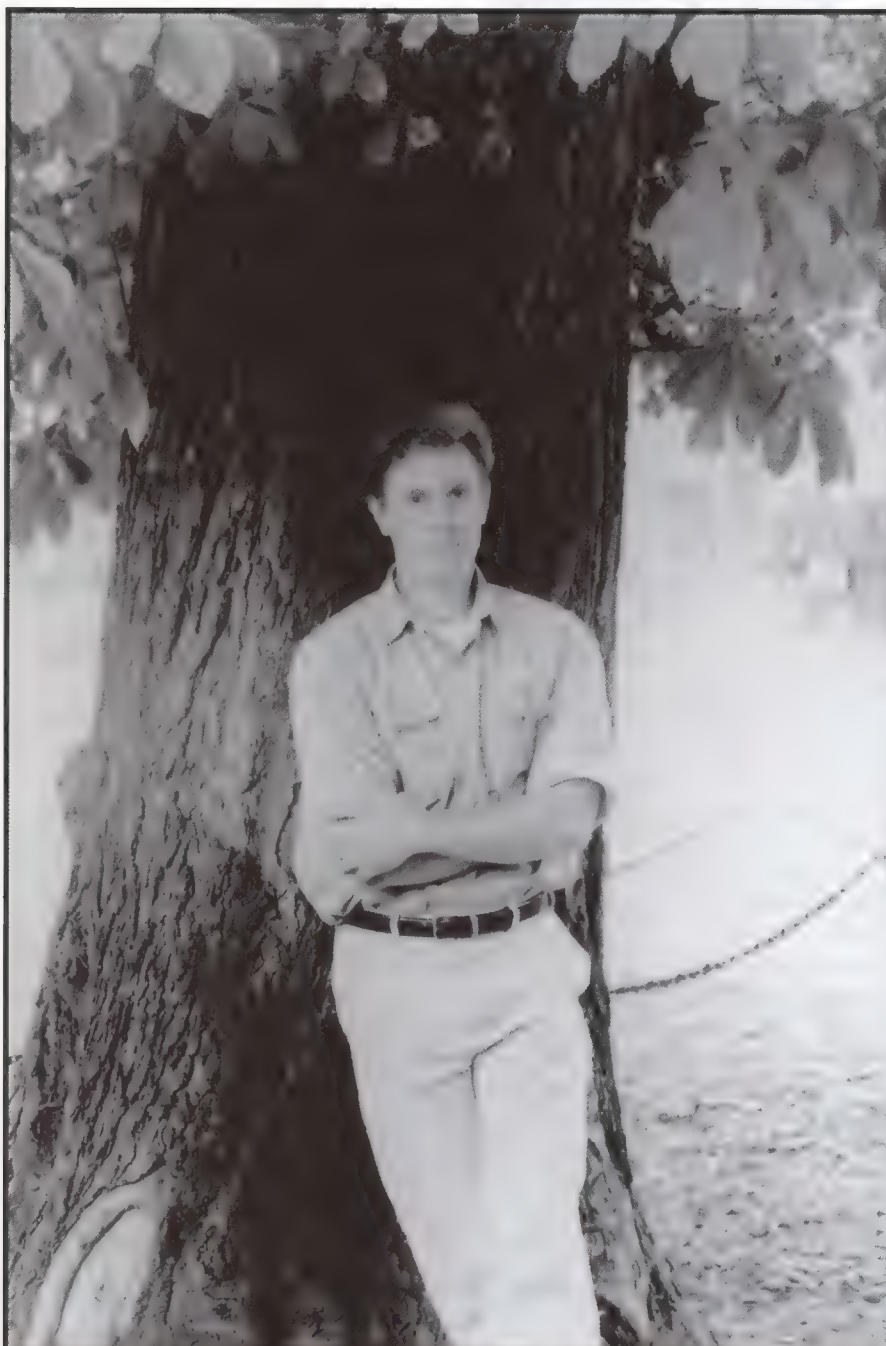
My articles have also been accused of being different to everything else in the magazine. So, what do you want instead? Contrived pseudo near-future miserablism? Slash-zombie transsexual teeny Brite? Swords against the dragon-elves? Or even a gushing review of the latest Greg Egan? Come on, people, total homogeneity is evil and should be resisted.

Let me admit to a few of my influences. Firstly, the 'Stop This Madness' column in the London listings magazine *Time Out* in which house journalists took an opportunity to call foul against various trends in modern life — pavement cyclists, cappuccino bars, the absurd gentrification of Hoxton, whatever. Harking a little further back, there was the fabulous 'Herb Gives It To You Straight' column in the now defunct football fanzine *The Arsenal Echo Echo* in which the patrician marble bust of 1930s manager Herbert Chapman gave his terse opinions on late 1980s shenanigans. Hornby it wasn't; hilarious it was.

Perhaps one could even go a little further back to the mythical machine wrecker himself as there is an admitted strain of Luddism underscoring my expressed sentiments. In a simplified soundbite: not all progress is necessarily beneficial to the individual or society at large and maybe some things were better in the past. Meet me in real life and I'm quite friendly but rather shy. The Dodo column is a stance. I may not even agree 100% with what I've written; indeed, my tongue may be very firmly in my beak. I am deliberately trying to provoke a response, even cause a little controversy. My aim is to make 'The Dodo Has Landed' the first thing a regular reader turns to upon receipt of a new TTA...just to see what that silly sod has got to say this time! It is my contention that the health of a magazine can be judged by its letters page. Now that that's gone virtual (now there's another thing...) me being slagged off on the web is an indication that at least someone's paying attention. Thanks.

Allen Ashley





## FOREIGN HOPES & DAY-LONG GAPS

James Lovegrove recently published his third solo novel under his own name. It is called *The Foreigners*, and it is a masterpiece. **Interview by David Mathew**

"*The Foreigners* took just over a year to write," says James Lovegrove. "But it all came together eventually, and I'm pleased with the outcome. I also managed to turn out several short stories during that time, using them as a way of clearing my head whenever I got bogged down in the novel. They can be good that way, like palate cleansers between courses of a long banquet."

The novel would seem to have strict analogues with the contemporary situation in England with the immigrants, the refugees. Says Lovegrove: "I'm not sure *The Foreigners* is so much about the refugee situation as it is about the interaction between a dominant culture and a subservient one. That's why there are the Xenophobes in the book, a political movement dedicated to reminding everyone that human interests should come before those of the Foreigners. All the Xenophobes are people whose races have at one time or other been enslaved or culturally crushed by an imperial power. The lead Xenophobe, for instance, is a Maori, and into his mouth I put all the arguments against humankind allowing itself to be overtaken by the Foreigners. The fact that he's a bad man doesn't invalidate what he has to say. Sometimes in fiction it's only the villains who tell the truth. The heroes tend to be deluded types, if not downright liars. The good guy in *The Foreigners*, Parry, is patently such a person. He's unequivocally on the side of good, but he lives in a sort of la-la land and that's why he's a bit crap and doesn't really know what's going on around him – because he doesn't *want* to know. I suppose that's the horrible truth about life: good people tend to be losers, and the bad guys get away with murder (literally so, in *The Foreigners*) because they know this. I'm a cheery, optimistic bastard, aren't I?"

Actually, he is. Or he seems so.

"I was at pains to show, in the shape of the Xenophobes, that racism can come even from people who have themselves been racially oppressed. You listen to some of the black extremist leaders in America, Louis Farrakhan for instance, and what they're saying about whites and Jews are in essence the same things that have been said down the years to them about their own race. That kind of tit-for-tat attitude, while understandable, is desperately counterproductive and undermines the advances that other, more progressive and enlightened minority leaders have achieved.

"This is, of course, a thorny and emotionally charged issue, and I was careful to try and present it in such a way that I myself would not be accused, by knee-jerk zombies, of the very defect I am criticising, and if I've managed that successfully, then 'Thank God' is all I can say. In the character of the chief Xenophobe, Toroa MacLeod, I was trying to show up a specific contradiction: that someone can be charming and charismatic and even honest most of the time, and yet still be a bastard. He's the



kind of guy who'll happily kick you in but is intelligent enough to need an excuse first, the kind of guy who'll force you to spill his pint so that he can start in on you.

"In a broader sense the book is also about, as Mr Bowie would have it, loving the alien. The point of every main character coming from a different country is, in part, to demonstrate the obstacles to mutual understanding that need to be surmounted if humankind is ever to achieve the ideal of perfection. To a certain degree this can be done, but I doubt whether we'll ever really overcome the more fundamental cultural divergences – of language, of philosophy, of outlook – that divide races.

"To give you a personal example, while travelling in Morocco a few years back I was approached time and again by locals who claimed to want to be my friend and just have a chat, but I knew – and they knew I knew – that ultimately all they wanted to do was sell me something. That's just how they are, that's one aspect of their cultural make-up, and I understood that, but at the same time it didn't prevent me from getting increasingly pissed off because I began to feel – as a tourist, a guest in their country – besieged, badgered, bothered. So I was failing to empathise with them, and they, by the same token, were failing to empathise with me. This is the kind of thing I'm talking about, this grinding of interracial

dled, protected. Parry believes this so strongly that it has blinkered him to certain uglier truths about humankind. That's the crux of the novel: Parry's blinkeredness. It's his (if I may lapse into Eng Lit pomposity for a moment) tragic flaw..."

I mention Kingsley Amis's comment about a good piece of art's simultaneous immediacy and distance, to which Lovegrove reacts favourably. "Immediate and distant' – I like the paradox of that. Yes, I think, in order to succeed, any kind of fantastic fiction has to have that combination of the familiar and the exotic: the reader needs to be taken by the author to somewhere strange in the company of recognisable, realistic characters. When the characters in an sf or fantasy novel start behaving in a completely unnatural manner, well, that's either very good writing or very bad, most likely the latter.

"I think – I would hope – that 'immediate and distant' also applies to *The Foreigners* in the sense that there are two distinct perspectives to it. On the one hand, heavily foregrounded, we have Parry, who I hope is an acceptably realistic protagonist, in that he is beset by frailties and yet still strives to maintain a positive outlook, which is a state of being I suspect most people can empathise with. On the other hand, there's the book's setting, New Venice, which at one point I liken to Shangri-La and which

people from time to time you'll find yourself pretty quickly disappearing, pen in hand, up your own backside. Men are more prone to being lonely individuals. Some of us claim to prefer it, but few I think actually do. I think we like to be unbothered for long periods of time, we like to be left to tend our thoughts (such thoughts as we have), or just do nothing and not get criticised for it. It's necessary for us. But in the end, company is more important.

"Parry in *The Foreigners* gets stuck on his own a lot, isolated like Frank in *Days*, but whereas Frank's isolation is at least partly deliberate, in that his job requires it, Parry is a victim of the choice he made to move to New Venice and become a Foreign Policy Police officer. His isolation is emphasised by the fact that there are so many foreigners – and Foreigners – around him in New Venice. That makes him, of necessity, an introvert, and that's handy from a literary point of view because a lot of the exposition in the novel takes place inside his head. Parry is one of the first characters I've written whom I've got inside of to such an extent. Thinking about it now, that was probably another reason why the book was hard to write – because inside Parry's skin was not always a comfortable place to be. He's basically a good man way out of his depth, and instead of him swimming, the story traces his slow,

**...that's the horrible truth about life: good people tend to be losers, and the bad guys get away with murder because they know this. I'm a cheery, optimistic bastard, aren't I?**

cogs at the most basic level, and it's one of the reasons I'm mostly pessimistic about the human race's survival chances. Unless we can all pull together I don't think we're going to make it to the 22nd century – and I don't think we *can* all pull together."

The scribbles for *The Foreigners* go back to a visit to Thailand. "I did a round-the-world trip back in 1990, blowing my advance from *The Hope* in one fell swoop, and the final destination on my itinerary was Thailand, and of course there I witnessed the Bangkok sex-industry – strictly from a safe distance, I assure you – and also the extraordinary financial disparity between the locals and the tourists like me. I'm not by any stretch of the imagination rich, but compared with the average Thai I'm loaded, and to many of them we visiting Westerners are like human cashpoints, there to dispense money. And that was the germ of *The Foreigners* right there: Earth as a tourist haven for an alien race, us economically dependent on them. The concept then evolved from that, and the dependence became not so much financial as emotional. In the book, the arrival of an alien race on Earth, the Foreigners, has brought global peace and stability, and many people, especially the central character Jack Parry, believe that the Foreigners are essential to maintaining this state of peace and stability. The Foreigners have to be indulged, kept sweet, cod-

is also implicitly a kind of Eden, a Camelot, and there are the Foreigners themselves, who are the very epitome of aloofness and unknowability. So you have that contrast between Parry and his surroundings, and it's a physical parallel to the thematic contrast at the heart of the book, which is between human fallibility and the ideal of perfection. I think what the book's trying to say is that we all would like the world to be a better place, maybe even a perfect place, but human nature is fucked up and gets in the way. That was pretty much the argument of *The Hope*, and to a lesser extent *Days*, and I suppose it's the loudest-buzzing bee in my authorial bonnet."

*The Foreigners* is of course the author's continuing artistic pursuance of the solitary, lonely male. This obsession or, more mildly, interest also permeates his shorter work.

"Maybe it's because I myself am a lonely male. Well, I'm not any more, of course, seeing as how I'm shackled up with a gorgeous and clever and perhaps best of all tolerant woman, but I am by nature a solitary person and I know, like Larkin says, 'how hard it is to be alone'. The odd thing about the job I do is that it demands solitude and outsiderdom, demands shutting yourself away for long periods of time in order to work – but of course at the same time it demands interaction and gregariousness, because if you don't get out and meet

inexorable drowning. Poor bugger."

*The Foreigners* is science fiction but it is certainly not hard science fiction: and there is no reason at all why it should be, but I ask if Lovegrove is interested in science at all. "I am, have always been and will always be rubbish at science. My brain is just not wired that way. I try to read *New Scientist* and it all just goes *blurp*, in-out, nothing sticking. I read popular-science books: the same. I read Paul Davies's *The Mind of God* and had absolutely no idea what I'd just been reading about. But I don't think science is integral to science fiction. The term is a bit of a misnomer, in fact, something we're stuck with just because no one can come up with anything better. And I think some sf authors use science – big weighty concepts, the latest theories, projections of current scientific thought – to cover up a lack of ability with character and dialogue and mood. 'Never mind the fiction, marvel at the wonderful jargonised science I'm using.' Hard sf is for me exactly that – *hard* – and so I don't really like it. I certainly don't write it. Can't. For me, using sf-ish techniques presents me with another way of telling a story about what's happening now (and saves me from having to do a lot of research, which I hate). I can skew the world slightly, introduce some mildly futuristic or ectopic element, and use that marginally changed reality to make general points



about humanity and the world without having to be answerable to the strictures and dictates of 'real' reality. The world is a big subject. It helps to be able to cordon off a bit of it, create a microcosm, and tell a story set there. That's the main sf technique I use: creating a microcosm and distilling my argument within that microcosm...

"Besides, I don't want to become restricted to any one genre. The book I'm working on now is nowhere near as science-fictional as *The Foreigners*, which is probably the closest I'm ever going to get to a 'straight' sf novel. I've no great plan to 'go mainstream' but I think *The Foreigners* took me as far into one particular genre as I want to go for the time being. No author should be confined to writing one sort of fiction if he or she doesn't want to. There is a need among booksellers, and among publishers, and among readers too, I think, the more conservative ones, for an author to be one type of thing and nothing else. Easy to get a fix on. Easy to bracket. But you have to go where you want to go, you have to at least attempt something different, even if only to discover that you don't like it or you're no good at it."

James Lovegrove is a down-to-earth, hard-working young man with his eye, enthusiastically, on the till. He wants, as any writer would want, to be more successful than the status he currently inhabits would

superstructure. They get us to the finish."

And would *The Hope* be the author's dark moments made print? "I banged the book out in six weeks, with the intention of creating the sickest, most depressing, angriest, nastiest vision of humankind that I could. You might well infer from this that I was not a happy camper at the time, and you would be right. I still have that anger, that despairing outrage, in me now, but it's not as intense as it was when I was 22-going-on-23. How could it be? I'd be in the loony-bin by now if it was. The state of the world still bothers me, but I've learned to modulate my response to it, to be more analytical and not so aimlessly aggrieved. Having a cooler head means you can hit your targets better, that's what I say. It's either that or I'm just getting old."

*The Hope* says much about contemporary concerns and conundrums. My belief is that it also refers to hubris, but Lovegrove doesn't feel it's about hubris so much as about human stupidity. "The Philanthropist who built the Hope had this naive vision of a better society. Society then proceeds to prove him wrong, by being ignorant and wasteful and vicious and venal. I'm beginning to discover that this is the theme underlying most of what I write: the dream of utopia set against the pigshit-thickness of people which prevents utopia from ever being achievable. It's not a new theme by any

which is that it shows an emotional buoyancy not always evident in *The Hope* – the stratified depths of the leading male, Frank, a security guard therein – but what clings to the memory as much as Frank is the plot-pin of the recurring *Days* motif.

"The recurring-logo motif throughout *Days* would seem to indicate that the novel has something to say about homogenisation," suggests Lovegrove, "the McDonaldising, the Disneyfication of the world. But to me that's a side-product, an inevitable one, of the principal theme of the book, which is commerce and the way commercial pressures have taken over almost every aspect of everyday life. It's startling to me how quickly the brand-naming of places and events has become commonplace, how prevalent it is and how little we notice it any more. It's all 'Carling this' and 'Vodafone that', and those annoying little 'comedy' skits or mini-adverts that bookend TV programmes like *Friends* and *Frasier* – I hate those! Commercial interests have insinuated themselves deeply into everything and we just don't register it any more and that to me is insidious. What next? Will it be Virgin London? Microsoft Manchester? 'The Houses of Parliament, brought to you in association with HP Sauce'?

"Here, and more so in America (where I lived for a year and a half), everyone is constantly trying to fuck everyone else over

## I found 'Carnal Appetite', where the girl eats her boyfriend's fingernail clippings, and then her boyfriend, to be a punchy, efficient little shocker...

imply. For example, his first novel, or short-story collection (depending on who you are talking to) was simpler to quantify.

"I was preparing *The Hope* recently for its reissue by Orion in the spring, and I found that the story I liked the most when I wrote the book – eleven years ago! – was not the one I most like now. I thought 'No Man's Land' kicked butt when I wrote it, but now I see it as mere King pastiche, with a bit of Lovecraft thrown in. Good enough, but all its effects are borrowed, someone else's. I also liked 'Reading Habits' back then, mainly because I was so pleased with the quasi-Philip Larkin librarian narrator, with his bilious, dyspeptic views. I found 'Carnal Appetite', where the girl eats her boyfriend's fingernail clippings, and then her boyfriend, to be a punchy, efficient little shocker, and I also thought 'Perfect Cadence' had stood up well, shot through as it is with Bradburyisms.

"Despite its episodic format, I wrote the book as a novel, all the stories in the order in which they appear, and towards the end I was concentrating as much on unifying all the disparate themes I had come up with as telling good, solid tales. Therefore the later stories don't stand up on their own as well as the earlier ones. They sacrifice inventiveness for the sake of explication. They're integral to the book, but they're its grubby engine-room rather than its glamorous

means, but it's one that experience time and time again validates. If there's a chance we can fuck something up, we will. Whatever we come across – a scientific discovery, a landscape, a work of art, a noble ideal, a good person – you can bet your arse we'll find some way of ruining it. That's just how we are. Yet you've got to have – here comes that word again – hope, haven't you?"

*The Hope* represents the disintegration of moral fibre. It describes an existence – however contemporary – in which nothing from the real world matters much. To wit: "The deterioration of the moral fabric of the passengers (not to mention the physical fabric of the ship) was inevitable the moment the Hope was conceived. That's why the Philanthropist topped himself. He realised this. At the moment of his triumph, he understood, like Alexander the Great seeing that he had no more worlds to conquer, that it was downhill all the way from here. So he committed suicide, while his creation was still perfect. He saw it was 'no good' because, thanks to its passengers and to entropy, it would never be that perfect again. What went wrong with the Hope is not that it left civilisation behind but rather that it took civilisation on board with it..."

The second novel was published in 1997 and is called *Days*. Concerning a vast – the *vastest* – shop, it is a novel memorable for many reasons and aspects, not the least of

for a profit, and it was this rather obvious but nonetheless pertinent truth that I was attempting to satirise in *Days*. Not just our obsession with money but our utter irrationality where money is concerned; money, and of course its ultimate purpose, which is the buying of stuff. Hence the 'shopping mauls' in *Days*, where customers go crazy over bargains, fighting tooth-and-nail over some essentially useless item simply because it's there and it can be purchased. When you step back and look at it, yes, we need to obtain certain products to eat, wear, live in and entertain ourselves with, but around these basic necessities a huge quasi-religion has developed, and a whole ugly ethos of customer/retailer has arisen whereby the person of each side of the equation is reduced to nothing more than a vector for money, as though money is just some virus we infect and re-infect one another with. So that's what *Days* is really: the fore-going rant, spread out over four hundred pages, with guns and jokes."

But back to Frank, a hollowed rather than hollow man, who is on his last day for the company in the book. "Frank sets out at the beginning of the book with the avowed intention that today is going to be his final day as a store detective at Days, a decision he has arrived at after thirty-three years of working at the place. He stands to lose the prestige and the material wealth his job has



brought him. He stands to gain his freedom. But as the day goes on, Frank learns that the armour of anonymity that makes him so good at his job cannot shield him from the incursion of emotions such as loyalty and love. He has spent most of his life in a self-imposed cocoon, and the freedom he is looking for entails the shedding of this cocoon, a willingness to open himself up to the outside world and all the pain it can potentially bring.

"All the names in *Days*, except perhaps those of the walk-on characters, are significant. There's the Day brothers, of course, all named after the days of the week, and their father Septimus, whose name reflects (and is perhaps one of the many contributing factors to) his obsession with the number seven. Frank is sincere, yes, inwardly, but he's also, in his speech, anything but frank – he has trouble communicating and often says everything except what he means. The three what I call B-list characters have names that constitute a little literary in-joke. The action of *Days* takes place over the course of a single day, and Bloom, Shukhov and Dalloway are the surnames of the main protagonists of three classic novels that also take place over the course of a single day: respectively *Ulysses*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Mrs Dalloway*. I like little games like that. In *The Foreigners*, which has a musical leitmotif, every surname I use is the surname of a composer. (And, to underscore the book's central idea of foreignness, every character hails from a different country.) I don't think that it makes any difference whether the reader is aware of these references, but I put them in so as to add another layer to the cake, another level of texture. It helps keep me amused through the writing, too."

James Lovegrove has also worked on several projects with Peter Crowther. The longest and most fully-formed is undoubtedly their collaboration, *Escardy Gap*: a Bradburyesque, kind-of *Twilight Zone*-y tale of a muscle of America rarely flexed.

Is the Bradbury connection valid? "Well, yes, absolutely. Bradbury I first encountered when I was 11, when a teacher read us 'The Veldt' in class one day. Then, during my teens, I hit a real Bradbury phase, where I charged through every one of his books I could find. I knew that the stories are sentimental, sometimes cloyingly so, and I knew that, content-wise, some of them are gossamer-thin. It was the language that hooked me. The dance of the words. The ache that Bradbury can conjure up with just a few light simple brushstrokes. As with all adolescent passions, it's a past thing now, a burned-out pleasure. Back then, Bradbury's work seemed almost my exclusive secret, something I owned that no one else could understand or share in. But I also knew that Bradbury was the key to making my liking for sf somehow more acceptable, not just to myself but to other people; to making it not so much of a furtive pleasure. Bradbury

had convinced me that sf could aspire to great art. And that's pretty much my take on all genre fiction now. Much of it's crap, but there are jewels amid the junk, opals among the ordure, that are as beautiful and as lasting any of the best that mainstream literature has to offer."

For all that, *Escardy Gap* isn't meant to be taken too seriously. "The horror is undercut by humour throughout, and I think humour in any genre work, in fact in any kind of fiction, is essential. It's important for my enjoyment of a book to be amused by it, and that's what I try to do when writing: keep my tongue at least within the vicinity of my cheek."

A sequel has been started, but Lovegrove is also pretty busy with his own projects. "I'm working on a novel called *Untied Kingdom*, plus the one after that, which I think is going to be called *Play*, and that'll take me to the end of 2001 if things go according to plan. Pete and I collaborated on a chapbook called *The Hand That Feeds*, and we have plans for the characters from that – an occult group known as the Six who live and operate in post-WW2 San Francisco – to feature in at least another five stories that will together constitute a full-length novel. So if anything's going to happen any time soon, it won't be an *Escardy Gap* sequel, it'll be a Six novel."

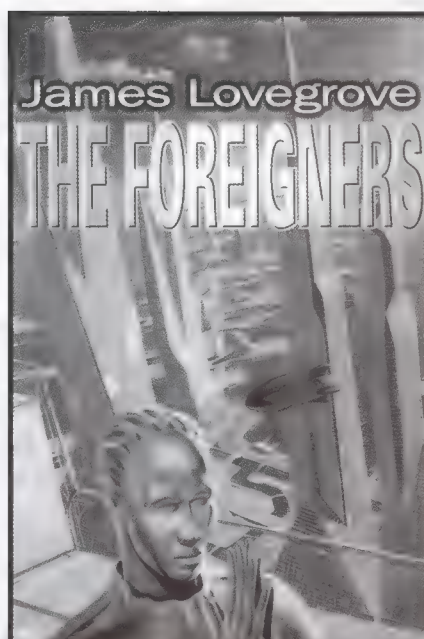
Now that we have discussed the various projects to which James Lovegrove has given his name it seems time to ask him to rank his own novels. However, it is not a question that goes down very well. "That's a bit like asking a father to say which of his children he likes best and which least!" But he does describe the different and distinct resonances each has for him...

"*The Hope* I wrote without really having a clue what I was doing. It's my least self-conscious, most unpremeditated work, and therefore probably the purest piece of right-brain creativity I can lay claim to. In spite of its many peculiarities, or maybe because of them, I have great affection for it.

"*Days* came at a crucial time for me, since I was close to giving up on writing as a career. I wrote the book while I was living in Chicago, away from all that was familiar, and I think that sense of dislocation helped. It jump-started the old creative juices. Certainly I felt that with *Days* it was shit or get off the pot, and I'm glad – and relieved! – that it worked. If it hadn't, I wouldn't be talking to you now.

"As for *The Foreigners*, it was an act of consolidation for me. I felt the pressure was on after *Days* was so well received, and I decided I wanted to do something a bit different, both more conventional and at the same time tampering with convention. I think its one drawback is that it's long. I have this desire to produce concise, pithy little novels, 250 pages at most, but it seems that I can't do that. Still, that's what editors were put on this Earth for, eh?"

Fair comment.



## THE FOREIGNERS

James Lovegrove

Gollancz hb, 421pp, £16.99

It was a bizarre and beautiful invasion. Suddenly from nowhere, the Foreigners were everywhere: walking the streets of twenty-first century Earth as if they had been there all along; their inscrutable golden masks floating above the crowds on top of their seven-foot robe-clad bodies.

They brought with them the technological marvel of Crystech, at once a power source and a building material of unearthly beauty. They banished all our worries and heralded a new utopia.

All they asked was that we sing to them. It was surely too good to be true. The only thing that could possibly go wrong was that one day they might leave as suddenly and mysteriously as they had arrived, throwing us back into the dark ages.

Now, in a room in one of the hotels on the gleaming white streets of New Venice, one of the Foreigners has been found dead, its robes and mask lying empty on the plush carpet next to the body of the Siren it had paid to sing to it. An accident? A bizarre cross-species suicide pact? Murder?

Jack Parry, late of the Metropolitan police, now of the Foreign Policy Police, is under pressure to find out what happened before news gets out to the public, or before it happens again and the Foreigners go, giving us back disharmony and, perhaps, our freedom.

James Lovegrove is the Arthur C Clarke Award nominated author of *Days*, *The Hope* and, with Peter Crowther, *Escardy Gap*. He has also written one children's novel, part of the *Web* series, *Computopia*. He is 34 and lives in Sussex. A new short story, called 'Running', begins overleaf.



**Awake just before the alarm, as ever. I sometimes wonder**

why I bother setting it, but then I suppose I wouldn't wake up just before it if I didn't set it. The curtains are fringed with light. I don't look at the foot of the bed, but I know Kieran is standing there, as ever. Pale little face. Wide, solemn eyes. Silent. I can picture him without looking. He's been there a while.

Marie stirs, snuffles, rubs her nose, draws the duvet up tighter to her chin. "Alex?" she murmurs.

"Go back to sleep. It's OK."

I switch off the alarm before it rings. I stand up. In the dawn light: Kieran. He watches me as I pad across the room, his head slowly turning. I go out onto the landing, over to the spare room. There, I rummage through the chest of drawers, taking out items of running kit: singlet, shorts, socks, and what sportswear retailers euphemistically term an 'athletic support'. While I get dressed, Kieran waits in the doorway. He's seen this ritual of mine countless times, this transformative act of donning skimpy name-brand sports clothes. Naked man becoming runner. He observes without comment — not even his expression betrays what he might be thinking.

I round out my running ensemble with a stopwatch — a digital wristwatch with a fat dial and a chunky plastic strap — and a large blue neckerchief rolled up and tied around my head bandanna-style, to keep the sweat out of my eyes. Downstairs to the hallway, Kieran patiently following. On with my trainers: bulky, well-sprung, absurdly expensive. Now a few warm-up exercises. Stretching thighs, calves, hamstrings. Unknotting the night from my anatomy. Loosening and limbering up while my audience of one stares stolidly from the staircase. And then at last out through the front door, onto the street.

A blackbird is chirruping, its bright song lilting between the houses. The town is quiet and there's a fitful dawn breeze. It feels like it's going to be a fine day. Weather-wise, that is.

I start off along the pavement. I don't glance back, but if I did glance back I know I would see Kieran, perhaps at the living-room window, perhaps outside the house, at the front door or the front gate. But I don't glance back. I'm off, at an easy, loping, breaking-in pace. I beep the stopwatch. Time starts counting up from 0:00 in flickering increments.

For the first half-mile I'm making my way out of town, threading along car-margined streets until I reach one of the main roads, then heading along that — feeling like I'm the only moving thing in the entire world. I have no idea what circuit I'm going to take this morning. The route is still unplanned. There are myriad possibilities. My knowledge of the lanes and byways and footpaths and thoroughfares in and around the town is extensive. I know them as vectors in space but also as vectors in time. I know roughly how long it will take to complete any given section. By putting the various sections together I can plot out a course of any duration I choose, from half an hour to two hours or more.

Breath coming easy. Knees bearing up. I think I'll turn right here, off the main road, down a shared drive that leads to a public bridleway. Shoe soles slapping. I've had this pair of trainers nearly three months now. It's getting to be time for a new pair.

9:11, 9:12, 9:13... I'm at the river now, on a high-banked towpath. Some cows lumber out of my way, one of them emitting shit in a spectacularly violent fashion.

15:15, 15:18, 15:19... Up through Cutter's Copse and over a stile into one of Mr Stevenson's fields. I've met Mr Stevenson a couple of times while out running. He was a grumpy farmer long before British farmers had good reason to be grumpy.

29:41, 29:42, 29:43... I'm climbing a steep chalk track. It's a killer, not just on the legs and lungs but on the lower back, that mesh of muscles where spine meets pelvis. I lean into the gradient, taking short little tiptoe steps.

36:21, 36:22, 36:23... Up high now, along the crest of the hills on a broad bone-white path like the exposed spine of some dead-and-buried leviathan. A bit of a twinge in one ankle — an old running injury, never quite been allowed to heal properly. I don't let it hamper me.

43:41, 43:42, 43:43... Now down, the town coming into view, and the town bypass, cars spinning along in both directions. Early commuters, beating the rush. I'll be joining them soon.

56:18, 56:19, 56:20... Back on the streets again, confined to pavement. Past Mr Ghosh, opening up his shop. "Hi." "Good morning to you!" The final push for home, stepping up the pace, kicking out, make it good, every little extra helps.

58:31 — beep. Home. I bend over, bracing my hands on my knees. Breathing slows. Heart rate declines. Sweat accumulates at the tip of my nose and drips off.

Marie's up and about now, and there's coffee in the percolator and bread in the toaster. "Good run?"

"Yeah. Shaved off a few seconds on the towpath bit."

"Oh. Good."

She doesn't really care, but she pretends to care and that's what makes a marriage. She thinks I'm obsessed with my running. Thinks I overdo it. Thinks it doesn't behove a man in his early forties to be so concerned over physical fitness. I always did run, though, even before I knew her, so from the outset she's had to accept it as just the way I am. The fact that I'm keener on running than I ever was — well, she's learned to accept that, too.

I shower. Shave. Dress for work. Breakfast. A kiss, then the car.

I'm in the office supplies business. I help run a modest-sized but thriving firm. We deliver throughout the south-east. If you work in the region, there's every chance you've seen our catalogue. Very possibly you use products purchased from us. Maybe that foolscap pad you jot notes on comes from us, and the pen you jot with. Maybe those staples, those drawing pins, those paperclips — maybe even that chair you sit in every day and that desk you sit at. We have good local market penetration. Several bigger firms have tried to take us over, and failing that tried to muscle in on our territory. It's never worked. Our customers like us. We are where we are, and we'll stay there.

The day, as every working day does, passes. At lunchtime I get my first glimpse of Kieran since I left for my run. I'm out buying a sandwich from the van that visits the industrial estate at half past noon every day. As I'm queuing up, I spot him at the edge of my vision, hanging around near one of our delivery lorries. I buy my chicken-and-sweetcorn on brown and carry the plump, cellophane-wrapped packet indoors.

Later in the afternoon, I'm doing inventory in the warehouse, and there's Kieran, waiting calmly at the end of the computer accessories aisle. I concentrate on my clipboard, not losing count of the reams of printer paper in front of me. I remember when seeing Kieran used to unnerve me so much that I could scarcely hold a pen. Now I can acknowledge that he is there but at the same time tune him out, so that he becomes just



something in the background, a piece of the furniture almost. Amazing what you can cope with, what you can make seem normal, if you put your mind to it.

By day's end Kieran is inside my little office, hovering by my desk, just next to the framed photo of Marie. He never says anything, never does anything except look at me.

It's enough.

Clocking-off time. Home again, home again. Kieran rides with me in the car, perched in the passenger seat. There was a time when I used to advise him, jokingly, to strap himself in. I've stopped doing that. Got bored. It ceased to amuse.

Almost as soon as I'm home, it's back into a set of clean running clothes and I'm off again. Kieran's there to see me leave. No wave, no goodbye, no "See you!" As usual, he's somewhere between the car and the front door when I go.

I pound up to the old race course, where they train horses now so that they can perform elsewhere. A footpath follows alongside the white rails, then diverges, taking me onto Farmer Stevenson's land again, through a fallow field, down to the railway cutting, across, along an ancient straight lane that leads to a Norman church, and eventually to the river again, the oozing chocolate-milk river where some swans are swimming, stately and blazing-white, chins drawn to necks like disapproving dowagers, and then the river and I part company and I'm approaching a football field, netless goal posts for the public to use for games of kickabout, and past that there's a park and then a spread of waste ground...

Often I head here without realising I've headed here. My feet just seem to lead me.

This is where it happened.

Here, among stinging nettles and gigantic bursts of purple buddleia, his cries were never heard — here in this waste ground at the edge of town, where people frequently come, walking their dogs, cycling, heading for the football field, and of course running. Lots of people come running this way.

I pick my way along a worn-smooth path. It's 42:59, 43:00, 43:01 on my stopwatch.

The memory is as vivid as if it was yesterday.

The boy (I didn't know his name then) and the man with him, the man holding him tightly, grimly, by the arm. I came around a corner and there they were, standing side by side on the path, a tableau. They had heard me coming. The boy in tears, the man stern and angry. Father and son, I thought. And that's what I told the police later. I thought they were father and son. Son misbehaving, father cross with him, son upset, fretful.

But I didn't really think that. One glance at them and I knew something else was going on. The way they were standing, body language, their attitude to each other — none of it seemed right. I realised that, but in the selfsame instant I chose *not* to realise it.

The man stepped aside, pulling the boy with him.

The man's name is Andrew Wilcox. He had raped and murdered four children already. Kieran was his fifth and final victim.

They have him in prison now. In solitary for his own safety. I ran past.

I run past where I saw them standing. Sometimes somebody deposits an offering of flowers here. A member of Kieran's family, I assume. Yes. There. A dozen carnations, brittle-stemmed, petals shrivelled and brown.

I remember Kieran's mother in court, when I formally identified Andrew Wilcox as the man I'd seen with her son. Kieran's mother, strong and emotionless up until that moment, and then all at once breaking down, sobbing, having to be helped from the courtroom. Up until that moment she had managed to keep it all in, but when I testified, when I, the eyewitness,

# ***RUNNIN'***

## ***JAMES LOVEGROVE***

said in answer to the prosecuting barrister's question that yes, it was the man in the dock, *that* was the man I saw — then she lost control. Everything she had dammed up came rushing out. Not because of what had been done to her son, but because of what could have been prevented.

The final straight. Five minutes from home. I think Marie and I have a dinner date this evening. The Motters. Or possibly the Phillipses. There'll be the usual banter, the usual sly gossip, the usual boasting about possessions, the usual aimless drunken flirting. And someone — I guarantee this — someone at some point will turn to me and say, "It's so impressive, all that jogging you do, Alex. I wish I had your self-discipline. A round of golf is about the most I can manage." Or, as it may be, "A stroll down to the shops" or "A game of tennis." And then: "It's good to stay fit. I do admire you."

And I'll give some airy, dismissive reply, something along the lines of "Well, I can't help it, you know. I just have to do it."

I don't know when it was that I first understood that the running kept Kieran at bay. I think it's just something I became aware of gradually, something I figured out only after it had become obvious. I was running perhaps three, four times a week when he first started appearing. I went insane for a little while, of course. I can say that now quite safely. No other word for it: insane. The doctor tried to help by prescribing tranquillisers, and the psychiatrist tried to help by telling me that it was all perfectly understandable, it was just a manifestation of my feelings of guilt (my 'unwarranted' feelings of guilt). Marie left me for a couple of months, but she came back, God bless her. I kept running throughout. Habit. And finally I noticed that whenever I ran, I lost sight of Kieran for a bit. As if he was dogging me but couldn't keep up with me when I went faster than walking speed.

So I ran.

So I run.

I've established how long I need to run per day. An hour in the morning will shake him off till the afternoon. An hour in the evening will shake him off again till early morning.

I think this is what he wants.

The Phillipses tonight. Or is it the Motters?

At dinner parties and other social occasions I can always tell what friends and acquaintances really think of me, of what I did, or rather didn't do. Oh certainly I've been given all the right expressions of sympathy, that soft litany of reassurance. *I'd have done the same in your shoes. I mean, who would have known?* But I can tell what these people are really thinking.

That I'm the priest. That I'm the Levite. The one who passed by when I should have intervened.

And what will happen when I'm too old to run any more? When my knees have crumbled and my hips are rusted stiff and I'm doing the walking-stick hobble, the Zimmer-frame shuffle? When I'm no longer able to outpace Kieran?

Then he will be always at my side, my constant companion, my eternally-ten-years-old shadow.

Well, that will be when it will be.

In the meantime, I have my penance.

***RUNNIN'***



in the pineal colony



glen dennis



**Alice had split with her boyfriend a month earlier and offered** me the spare air ticket ‘with no strings attached’. In the days leading up to our departure, I had fretted over the meaning of this statement. Had she been hinting at the possibility of a fling? Or had she been making it clear that no such prospect was on the cards?

Either way, I needed a vacation. For too long I’d been pushing people away, not wanting to catch their mind diseases. Misery and loneliness had deservedly ensued. I’d even developed a psychosomatic bout of crabs — the ultimate irony for a social recluse.

It was a two hour drive from the airport to the village. We were heading towards the land of the Rainbow people. The new road twisted its way precariously up the mountain, often supported by concrete stilts. It must have been a major construction project and I couldn’t see how it had been justified. Perhaps the mythical Rainbow people had suddenly decided that it was time to let the outside world in.

The taxi driver was in a hurry and had a habit of overtaking farm vehicles on sharp bends. He seemed irritated by our chosen destination, despite the prospect of a large fare. I put this down to a local superstition or ancient rivalry.

From Alice’s enthusiastic descriptions, I had expected shades of *Lost Horizon*. Instead, we emerged into a developing coastal resort. Half-built complexes of apartments studded the hillside. You could tell that within a few years there would be an extensive tourist industry here. The new road and the taxi driver’s mixed feelings at our invasion were both explained.

“It’s beautiful,” I mumbled.

Alice glared at me, but I really was in awe of the place. This was my first ever break from the so-called temperate zones. I was used to perpetual drizzle and overcast skies. I’d never seen such magnetic light before.

Despite her disappointment, Alice had no hesitation in making a beeline for the modern hotel with all its conveniences. I was gripped by a fever of expectation. I stood by at reception with our luggage, feigning indifference. But my heart sank as I heard Alice, with the aid of a phrase book, insist on a room with twin beds.

*Relax*, I told myself, trying to cultivate an easy-going attitude of acceptance. *Isn’t it enough just to be here?* I knew that there was nothing less attractive than desperation. I smiled grimly and signed the register.

As we unpacked, Alice threw me an unlabelled bottle of pills. For a brief moment, I thought that my luck had changed.

“What are these?” I asked, praying that I’d just been offered the latest remedy for the impotency of bad karma.

“Melatonin capsules,” she explained. “Taking one before bed in a new time zone ensures a good night’s sleep.”

“A jet lag inhibitor? Thanks,” I said, though sleep was the last thing on my mind.

Whilst Alice took a shower, I idly flicked through pages on the World Brain. This was an obsessive habit, akin to navel or star gazing. I read that melatonin was a sleep-regulating hormone produced by the pineal gland. The amount released over a twenty-four-hour cycle varied, being greatest at night. A high light level inhibited secretion.

A couple of clicks and I had cross-referenced to ‘pineal gland’. In humans, the gland was situated midbrain and deep down. So how did it detect varying light intensities? Indirectly, through nerve pathways from the retina?

At that moment, Alice emerged refreshed and it was my turn for a shower. I quit the screen. I didn’t want her to think that I’d been checking up on the generously provided drugs. However, my rapid exit aroused other suspicions.

“What was that?” she asked slyly.

“Nothing,” I said, sounding like a liar. “Not what you think, anyway.”

I first noticed Simon staring at Alice from his vantage point at the bar. I was about to challenge him, when he smiled and sauntered over. No doubt he instinctively realised that Alice and I were just friends. I wish that I had been as adept at picking up the unconscious signals she emitted.

He introduced himself in a plummy, assertive accent that immediately put me on the defensive. He was taking a year or two out from his job in the City. Waves of indignation coursed through me. If only my kinsfolk had been able to step off the treadmill for a while and forget their incessant, health-destroying worries.

He somehow managed to casually drop the name of his college into the conversation. Alice winked at me conspiratorially. Our shared resentment was at least some consolation.

“I could have gone there,” she chirped, unimpressed. She was, after all, from the old neighbourhood.

“So why on earth didn’t you?” Simon said, taking the bait.

“I wanted no truck with privilege,” she explained.

“So you’re an inverted snob.”

“On principle, I’m against everything you and your kind stand for,” she said.

“Let’s go,” I said, shifting in my chair. Even I thought she had gone too far. I was soon to regret this magnanimous gesture.

The following morning, Simon breezed over to our table at breakfast. His audacity daunted me. He expressed regret for the previous evening’s outburst, knowing full well that it was Alice who owed the apology.

“So where are these Rainbow people?” Alice asked, making the mistake of feeling sorry for him. He indicated an ancient plaque that had been cemented onto the breeze block wall. Alice rooted through her phrase book.

“The Rainbow people are here?” she translated.

“Correct,” said Simon.

“But where’s ‘here’?” she persisted. “Are they serving us our breakfast?”

“Quite possibly,” Simon shrugged. He seemed amused by the idea of this mythical race doing our dirty work. “I believe the Rainbow people to be living fossils — proof that modern humans mixed with Neanderthals.”

“So they’re crossbreeds?” Alice whispered, conscious of the waiter at her elbow. She was falling for this spiel and there was nothing I could do about it. I became sullen and tongue-tied. I couldn’t compete with this shared enthusiasm.

“I prefer the term hybrids,” Simon said, pulling up a chair. He must have sensed my rising anger because he added: “The notion of distinct species once encouraged repellent pure race fanatics. In reality, there is a continuum with genes leaking from species to so-called species.” He unfolded a detailed map of the area by way of illustration. “Imagine the height at any point on this undulating landscape represents the number of individuals sharing certain genetic traits,” he said.

“So the peaks would approximate to species?” Alice asked.

“Yes,” said Simon flinching at the term.

“And the rare Rainbow people would be in a valley of this abstract terrain? Intermediate between say this major peak here, modern humans, and this extinct volcano, the Neanderthals?” she suggested like an eager pupil.

“But in real, physical space,” I sneered, “the Rainbow people are allegedly holed-up in the mountains. Or have they really come down to be our lackeys?”

“Point taken,” Simon said.

“Doesn’t hybridisation, like mutation, usually end in genetic catastrophe for the individual?” I pressed on.



"Yes. However sometimes new adaptations to prevailing conditions are chanced upon," Simon said.

"OK," I conceded. "But couldn't differences in DNA sequences be scanned for?" I was humouring him but Alice was enthralled.

"Who's going to believe my crazy speculations in the first place?" This false modesty incensed me.

"Has it occurred to you that you're patronising these people?" I asked. "Collecting aspects of their history like a Victorian naturalist pinning down his butterfly specimens."

"For christ's sake lighten up," Alice insisted. "Take that chip off your shoulder."

"I thought you were on *my* side."

"Sides?" she scoffed. "Grow up. There are no sides. Only individuals."

"What about last night's tirade?" I hissed.

"I was drunk," she said. "I'm sure Simon can find in his heart to forgive me." He smiled by way of assent. The blood was pounding in my ears. I stormed out, my self-respect in shreds. After this rout, Alice up-camped to Simon's room without comment.

Disturbed by the pain of deprivation, I sought refuge in inner aspects. I struggled to recall a wild theory of how the large-skulled, and presumably large-brained, Neanderthals had been driven to extinction by frenetic memes. These parasitic codes had fuelled an escalation in neural capacity. Eventually, the Neanderthals had been unable to provide the energy to sustain such furiously compulsive brains. Those individuals with slightly smaller, less energetically costly, brains had had an advantage in the scarce resource environment. The genes had inevitably pulled back in the leash.

So were the Rainbow people really an isolated enclave of hybrid human-Neanderthals? Species had their genetic integrity protected by reproductive isolating mechanisms or, as perhaps the case was here, by geographical barriers.

I tried to forget Simon's ideas and stubbornly pursue my own lines of inquiry. I became enmeshed in the World Brain's self-evolving telecommunications networks. I took up where I had left off the previous evening. Unlike Simon, I was untrained. I relied on hunches, clicking mindlessly from page to page. I learnt that Descartes had believed the pineal gland to be the organ through which the soul communicated. After all, we have only one pineal gland and, supposedly, one immortal spirit.

As luck would have it our — *my* — room was adjacent to the swimming pool. Simon and Alice made no concession to my brooding proximity. I kept the shutters closed, but could still hear the idiosyncratic endearments of a developing love affair.

Sometimes they would row openly. I would cease clicking at the terminal and my spirits would rise. Only to be dashed by the intensity of their inevitable reconciliation. I was aestivating in the heat. I lived through an endless cycle of yearning and wishfulfilment. Next time I visited the dentist, I was sure to be asked how frequently I ground my teeth.

I should have asked for a room change. However, I became perversely addicted to the self-torture of this voyeurism. I was in a bad way. I lost my appetite and frequently coughed up nothing but bile into the room's basin. My destiny was to play a minor role in the story of their holiday romance. If only I could have accepted this fate graciously, everything would have been fine.

"I'm having the time of my life," Alice said.

"Great," I said, feeling my world implode. She'd popped by to check on me. She need not have worried. I hadn't overdosed on melatonin. But I had been using my vodka glass to

throw a spectrum on the wall opposite. I half-hoped it would trigger a mental state that might bring me closer to the Rainbow people and thereby usurp Simon.

She pecked me affectionately on the cheek. I was so far gone that I even took heart from this innocent action. She seemed oblivious to the hold she had over me. I suppose this was the secret of her power. I was unable to renounce my attachment to an idealised life with her. Tears welled in my eyes.

"It's hot," I stammered by way of explanation.

"Very."

Simon called for her to go and rub sun tan lotion on his back.

"I thought you saw him as one of the enemy," I said. Her old man had slaved for a pittance so that the likes of this Simon could have an easy life.

"I'm learning to accept people for what they are."

Admirable, I thought, but why did she have to break the habit of a lifetime now? Something inside me snapped. I could hold out no longer. I collapsed to the floor, begging her to forget Simon. A point of no return had been reached. I was literally madly in love.

"Get up," she said as if ordering a dog to heel. I obeyed, revelling in this ritual humiliation on the principle that any reaction was better than none. I half hoped she'd snap a collar round my neck, complete with a name tag explaining that I belonged to her. Perhaps she'd even take me for a walk. Simon called again and she left me to lick my wounds.

His casual invasions of Alice's personal space tortured me. That evening in the restaurant, he sat with one arm draped across Alice's shoulder. I mumbled obscenities over and over. By mental telepathy I hoped that he could pick up my ravings.

"Did you say something?" Alice asked.

"No," I said. I was acting like a bad sport. Indeed, Alice and Simon increasingly came to treat me as a petulant child. I would soon no doubt be confined to having meals in my room.

"Are you a commie?" Simon asked. His clear implication being that I was a throw back to earlier days of class antagonism. Whereas Alice had adapted to new conditions. Aeons of resentment bubbled in my blood. I could almost believe in a Lamarckian inheritance of disenchantment being handed down the generations. Irrationally, I wanted to strike out at his smug face. For in this unbalanced state, I took him to represent everything that was wrong with the world.

To make matters worse, he spoke the local language and seemed to get on well with the hotel staff. How could I compete? Here, I was just as much an outsider as at home. I'd set out with unrealistic expectations. I recalled toasting to a successful holiday on the plane. From such promising beginnings things had soon deteriorated. Alice hadn't led me on. I had no one but myself to blame.

One morning, I decided to catch a bus to the city. The return journey itself would kill most of the day. As I waited at the stop, a motorcyclist pulled up on the opposite of the road. He removed his goggles and patted the dust from his leather waistcoat. He then ambled into a cafe, soon re-emerging with knives that glinted in the sunlight. He disengaged the bike's drive wheel and used its antique engine to power a grinding stone.

Puffing nonchalantly on his cigarette, he laid each sharpened knife onto a cloth by the roadside. He didn't seem to have a care in the world. For him, a day was a day and not something you dreaded. By comparison, my way of life was a sham. Was he one of the Rainbow people? I wondered.

Having finished, he packed the grinding stone back under the saddle. He waved to the cafe's owner and then pulled straight out into the path of a bus. I was suddenly collapsed





back into the moment. Customers rushed out from the cafe. Had I distracted the motorcyclist? No one openly blamed me, but I felt wretched.

Simon was soon on the scene in his hired jeep. I stood by feeling useless as he dictated events. He carried the old man into the back of the vehicle.

"You'd better drive," he said, throwing the keys at me.

"No," I said.

"What?" Both he and Alice were incredulous.

"I don't drive, OK?" I was numb, close to hysteria.

"Because you can't or won't?" Alice pressed. Sweat poured from my brow. Was this any time for an inquisition? Though I suppose that by not driving I had committed the ultimate heresy of the modern age. I was now suspect. How could I participate wholeheartedly in shared dreams of acquisition?

"Can't," I blabbered. Seeing the look of disgust on Alice's face, Simon calmly capitalised.

"No worries," he said. "You sit in the back with Alice and the old man. I'll take the wheel."

"So you don't even hold a licence?" Alice hissed as I climbed in.

"No." I could sense her coldly reappraising me in the light of this latest confession. I was no longer merely a zero in her eyes. I was now a minus quantity. The rest of the journey was spent in silence.

As I entered the room, Simon coughed nervously. A signal seemed to pass between him and the doctor. The light illuminating the X-ray film was abruptly switched off.

"Is he going to be OK?" I asked guiltily.

"He'll be fine," Simon said.

Alice snubbed me after this incident. I felt lower than the roaches that crawled across the floor at breakfast. At least they found the occasional crumb of comfort.

"Simon's arranged something special," Alice said, acknowledging my presence for the first time in days. I'd forgotten that it was my birthday. I didn't feel like celebrating. She'd doubtlessly gleaned my date of birth in the queue at immigration.

We were in the back of the jeep. In the rear view mirror I saw Simon hand over some cash and the vehicle's keys. He was sharing jokes with the two locals who were to be our guides. I recognised one of the hotel's waiters. He carried a sack. It was clear that something was alive in there and struggling to get out. Simon pointed at me and they all started to laugh.

"Is this wise?" I asked Simon, as he joined us.

"Where's your sense of adventure?" he smirked. He took my fear personally. "These people are peace loving. Their history has no wars. They have kept themselves to themselves."

"Nothing to worry about," the waiter grinned, indicating the writhing sack.

We ascended into the hills along a dirt track. Alice was excited by this mystery tour and tried to wangle our ultimate destination out of Simon. But he pleaded ignorance. As they chided one another, I pretended to doze.

"End of the line," Simon said. The track had become impassable. We were blindfolded by the guides.

"Is this really necessary?" I asked.

"Don't spoil things," Alice said and I obediently shut up. I was reminded of the party games of my childhood. We were trooped single-file through dense undergrowth. After an hour of stunted progress, we were allowed to remove our blindfolds. We'd emerged into a shallow clearing.

Even I was taken aback by the ruins. Simon seemed genuinely surprised too. Low, crumbling pyramids poked through the vegetation. Most of these broken structures were less than



three metres high, but there must have been over fifty of them.

"It's an ancient burial ground," Simon said after chatting to one of the guides. "Here is where the Rainbow people concealed their dead."

"The tombs seem to be randomly dispersed," Alice said as if offended by the lack of symmetry.

"No doubt there's some astronomical significance to their placement," Simon said.

We were then led towards the centre of this sacred site. For an absurd moment I thought that we were about to be sacrificed to a sun god. I clenched my fists in preparation for a fight. But we were not to be the victims. Instead the hotel's waiter retrieved three large reptiles from the sack. He placed them in an improvised enclosure of fallen masonry.

I'd seen these dinosaur-like creatures basking on villa walls. I had taken their third 'eye' to be deceptive camouflage that had evolved to ward off predators. But Simon put me right.

"Note the pigmented pineal gland," he said. By this stage my lovesickness had left me vulnerable to the slightest provocation. Ravaged by paranoia, I became convinced that Simon had somehow eavesdropped on my private researches. Or perhaps it was just blind chance, like Alice's blind love, that had led to this uncanny correspondence of interests. Was I being set up?

I stared at him, but he betrayed no hint of having said anything untoward. Indeed, he pressed on: "The pineal eye, an organ of doubtful function, is located between the two normal eyes. Lurking close to the surface, it even resembles a real eye, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps it is one," I said, trying to regain the upper hand and show that I was not intimidated.

"Maybe," he said. "In some lower vertebrates the pineal gland does develop a rudimentary lens and retina, suggesting it to be derived from an eye situated on the top of the head in an ancestral archetype. In others, though not organised as an eye, it functions as a light receptor."

"Or transmitter?" I said. I was only half joking.

The waiter held one of the reptiles between his knees. With a sharp knife he proceeded to cut around the pineal eye. I was mesmerised by the cruelty of this act. Yet the reptile didn't flinch. The reddish brown gland was teased out like a splinter that had lodged in the creature's brain. Robbed of its soul, the reptile scurried off into the undergrowth. Perhaps like a lost tail, its pineal eye would regrow. I hoped so. The local then offered the creature's pulsing soul to me.

"What I am supposed to do?" I asked frantically.

"This is the all-seeing eye of their ancestors," Simon translated. "Eating the gland is believed to temporarily restore things to their original light."

"I've got to eat this?" I asked. The gland squirmed in the light. This suggested that it had not relied on signals from the optic nerves of the reptile's two conventional eyes.

"Yes, why not?" Simon seemed eager to sense the ancient light of long-lost sentient beings. But there again, it was easy to be open to new experiences with Alice on your arm. I was wary of being made to look a fool and could not relax.

"What will be restored? The ruins or the ancestors themselves?" I asked anxiously. Simon sought reclarification, but the guides just laughed.

"I'm sure they mean these ruins," Simon said, ruffled. "Fragments will be reassembled into a whole, I guess." Would broken hearts be mended too? I wondered.

"The pineal gland might well have been the evolutionary forerunner of the modern eye," I said. "But in modern humans, it is a shadow of its former self, emitting a hormone rather than fossilised rays of light."

"These reptiles have hardly changed in millions of years," Simon said.

"Perhaps the gland contains an hallucinogen," Alice said.

"Melatonin isn't an LSD equivalent," I said. "Though it does induce sleep and is perhaps thereby connected with REM."

"Get on with it, birthday boy," Alice urged.

"According to Descartes, doesn't this mean that I am about to eat the creature's soul?" I asked, desperately seeking a way out.

"No," said Simon. "He had held that animals were automata, while humans alone had a soul. So don't worry."

"But there again, Descartes was unaware that other vertebrates also possess a pineal gland, ergo a soul," I said.

"Give it here," Simon said, grabbing the vestigial eye. "Can't be any worse than sheep's eyes." Even then, I was wary in case that by some sleight of hand he wasn't really eating it. But he opened his mouth and revealed the chewed up mush on his tongue. Alice and I then took our turns.

The locals didn't participate in this supposedly ancient ritual. I was reminded of the early anthropologists who had been duped by wisecracking natives. Shocking rituals had been conjured up on the hoof for the benefit of gullible Victorian scientists.

I didn't receive the slightest buzz. The pyramid tombs remained in ruins. Neither did I see the ghosts of the Rainbow people. Perhaps my depressed mood had isolated me from the gland's effects. Or perhaps I hadn't drunk enough of the local brew that had washed down the pineal delicacy. Simon and Alice certainly had. They couldn't keep their hands off each other. They were like acid heads who refused to believe that they'd been sold dud tabs. I looked on glumly, withdrawing into myself. Later, we re-donned blindfolds and were returned to the vehicle.

Alice announced that she was staying on.

"With Simon?" I stammered. We were due to fly out the next day.

"Yes," she said coldly, pushing the stake deeper. She'd given me enough hints. Would I now finally get the message into my thick skull? Simon kindly volunteered to drop me at the airport. He had won the day. His type always did and always would.

I felt purged to be back in the old neighbourhood. I'd been naive. As if transferring myself about the planet's surface was ever going to solve my fundamental problems. Only great shifts in time, not space, could help me.

A year passed without so much as a postcard. Alice's apartment was re-let. I finally gave up all hope of ever seeing her again. Of course, only then did things begin to pan out for me.

One evening, I was about to zap my TV dinner when there was a knock at the door. Alice was slumped on the threshold. She had no luggage and had obviously fled the land of the Rainbow people in great haste. There was no sign of Simon. Had he dumped her? Oddly, I didn't get any pleasure from the idea of the boot being firmly on the other foot. She was sobbing and beside herself. Whatever had happened to her out there?

She wouldn't, or couldn't, answer my questions. She went straight to bed without uttering a word. I rang up the hotel determined to speak with Simon. I didn't care what time of the day it was out there.

The receptionist now spoke fluent English and informed me that Simon had been taken seriously ill. From having been ready to verbally attack him, I now felt low and mean. I loosened my collar. I was put onto the city hospital. Apparently, Simon was responding well to 'intensive gene therapy'. As I was not a family member that was all they would tell me.

I was stunned to discover that Alice had abandoned Simon in his hour of need. But then who was I to preach? I didn't



even know the exact nature of his illness. Gene therapy threw up a multitude of possibilities.

Twice a day, I roused Alice from her deep sleep and spoon-fed her soup. She lay on her side most of the time, with her face turned away from me. Once, I knelt by the bedside and daringly stroked the back of her head. I curled her thick hair around my fingers. I was in heaven.

I felt a soft indentation in her skull. Curious, I looked closer. Through the entangled hair, something seemed to blink at me in the half-light. I instinctively withdrew my hand and the hair fell back into place. I paced the room. I felt sick.

I wasn't certain what I had seen. Summoning all my courage, I re-parted her hair. The eye's 'lens' was barely perceptible below a translucent membrane of skin. This cataract was all that concealed the secrets of her submarine life. Should I fetch a doctor? An instinct of self-preservation told me not to. I thought of Simon. Had Alice seen something too and balked? No wonder she had been dumbstruck.

I recalled the motorcyclist's X-ray. The doctor had hastily taken the plate down but I had glimpsed enough. Even I had been able to tell that there was something not quite right with the film. On the World Brain, I discovered that small deposits of minerals such as calcium can render the pineal gland visible to X-rays. I had an uneasy suspicion that an X-ray of a living Neanderthal would have revealed the same distended structure.

Neanderthals had had larger skulls than modern humans. But did that necessarily endow them with extra neural capacity? Perhaps instead, room was taken up by an overripe pineal gland cum third eye. This pineal eye might well have been a powerful and bioadaptive sensory organ. But outside their social and physical enclave, it would have proved to be an energetically costly maladaptation.

Perhaps the genes encoding for this pineal eye were only switched on in certain conditions. Had the secretions of the reptile's pineal gland activated dormant DNA code? Explaining Simon's corrective gene therapy and Alice's on-going transformation?

Alice has slept for three days now. I have learnt that the pineal gland also plays a role in hibernation via the secreted melatonin. I think of the jet-lag tablets. Had she unwittingly given me a clue? Or is my desperate mind clutching at straws?

Alice certainly seems to be in a state of torpor. Her pulse is barely perceptible. She is cold and this lowered body temperature hints at a drastically reduced metabolic rate. Is this an adaption to adverse conditions? Or is she in a cocoon state? After all, the caterpillar and butterfly that eventually emerges from the chrysalis share identical genetic information. It is the hormonal signals produced by the caterpillar's brain that determine which segments of the code are expressed.

The pineal gland is large in children and begins to shrink, along with the imagination, at the onset of adolescence. Higher levels of melatonin in children may explain their tendency to sleep long hours. It is during episodes of REM that adaptive neural circuits are hardwired as others become obsolete through underuse. So perhaps Alice's withdrawal from the world is a preparation. A conserving of resources as inwardly things are restructured.

I struggle to recall a song from a musical. Something about 'always chasing rainbows'. I seem to be forgetting more and more. Yet paradoxically my childhood memories come back all the brighter and clearer, as if by way of compensation. I am shedding a lifetime of memetic baggage. All the mindless facts and dates are fading. But I can remember with clarity the smile of my first sweetheart.

What if the meme-fired explosion of the cortex, and so-

called higher brain areas, has stifled previous intuitive ways of sensing the world? Evolution, I now realise, is neither about progression or regression. With the proliferation of meme-inspired gadgetry, environmental conditions have swung back in favour of this pineal eye. Out in the world of psychotic consumers, the Rainbow people are the perfect emergent adaption.

Combing my hair this morning, I noticed a patch of my skull had softened. I tentatively probed the developing cataract. The process is beginning. A section of skull is reverting into a layer of congealed blood. I can feel the onset of Autumn in my bones, though it is still high summer outside. As the night lengthens, the production time of melatonin will increase. This will in turn stimulate the production of hormones which transform appetite and metabolic rate.

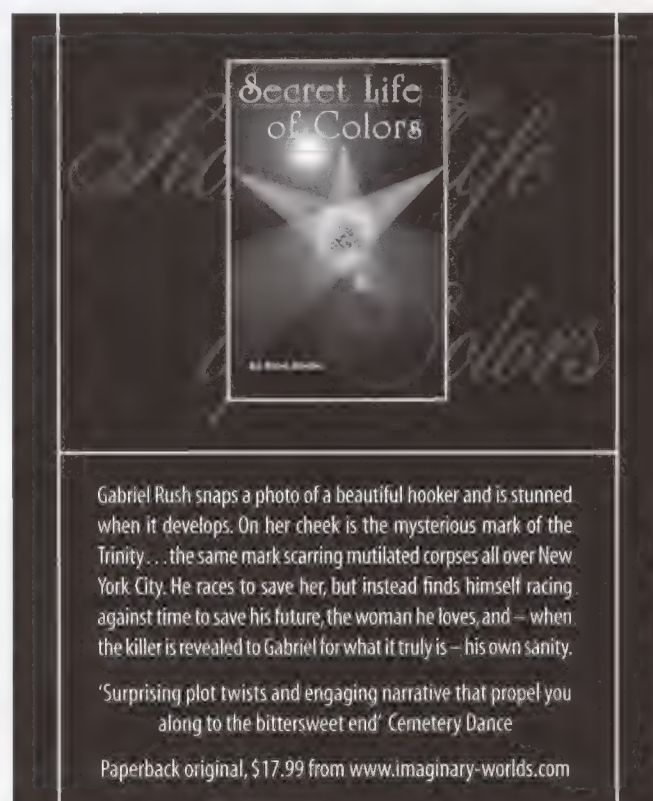
We are born with the innate ability to be conditioned and socialised by myths that are beyond reason. For too long, I have given over my life in return for delusions of petty power. Simon was right. The class war was a distraction. I have been a fool to rage against a system that is inadvertently sowing the seeds of its own destruction. My ego convulses like a diseased gland. But the pineal eye flourishes.

As I lie beside Alice, the all-seeing eye shines out. I am no longer repulsed. Lurking just below the surface, it is tuned to frequencies beyond our ken. Its rays penetrate to the core of my rotten heart. Occasionally tears of melatonin seep through the opaque covering of skin. What is going on in that dreaming head? Are the neural connections of a new outlook being formed?

Any day now I too will shut down and dream. Only through this delirium might fundamental realities be restored. Even the monomaniac might finally be cured.

When the collective hormonal alarm clock rings, we will stir. The new creatures will seem to be from a different planet. They will not crave what we crave. For now, this is a secure den. I am going to have to get used to life in the pineal colony.

This is Glen's second published story. The first, 'Our Lady of the Beetle', was published in TTA19. He lives in Folkestone, Kent.





'...it's a safe bet that when the soundtrack music ominously boomed and the heroine went off to wander about a hospital basement full of dripping pipes, you, fragile, easily-influenced and perched on an itchy seat as delicately as a piece of Dresden, were coated in a moist craquelure of fear. Now it takes an act of sensory terrorism on your eyes and ears to even draw your attention away from confectionery'

**Like all fetishes, cinephilia has its roots in** early development. I'm pretty sure that you remember the first few films you ever saw much more clearly than the ones you've seen lately, because way back then, glued to a horsehair seat sucking an orange Jubbly in my school-regulation gabardine mac and interfere-with-me short trousers, I wasn't the image-saturated cliché-wary jade I am now. Everything was fresh. Everything was new. When a movie character in a tense situation said 'I've got a bad feeling about this' or 'You

not the forties. After the war, cinemas thought they could regain their former audiences, and soldiered on into a darkening future that lasted for over three more decades. In fact, UK box office receipts didn't hit rock bottom until 1979. It was a slow death for the Roxys and Gaumonts, and even once all hope was gone the great halls were reconfigured until they ultimately proved impervious to conversion.

I once remember picking up a recruitment leaflet that said 'Be A Cinema Manager!' Inside the folded A4 sheet was a picture of a man in

# ELECTRIC DARKNESS



should try to get some sleep', I didn't think it was a cliché, I thought it was utterly original. And it's a safe bet that when the soundtrack music ominously boomed and the heroine went off to wander about a hospital basement full of dripping pipes, you, fragile, easily-influenced and perched on an itchy seat as delicately as a piece of Dresden, were coated in a moist craquelure of fear. Now it takes an act of sensory terrorism on your eyes and ears to even draw your attention away from confectionery. Or perhaps you were always cynical; raised before a background of televisual thud and blunder, saturated by networks that lived in fear of you changing channels, and shows for whom the ultimate crime was to leave dead air or a blank screen for more than a millisecond. Whichever way the visual medium of the 20th century got to you, rest assured that it did, and it damned well left its mark, unless of course your sole interests are sport and earning your living, in which case what on earth are you reading this magazine for?

In this column I intend to explore the cinema-going experience from every angle, but that's going to take some time, so it makes sense to start with a look at the images that first gained access to your soul, and how they got there. Of course, my memories are not yours. You may have grown up surrounded by the purple pile of multiplex carpeting. I lost my childhood in the damp smoky stalls of the last cinema palaces. It seemed that every London high street had at least three of these vast auditoria, with enormous hand-painted billboards above their canopies, melancholy empty interiors and screens the size of football pitches. There's a post-war reek about such features, those rows of curve-backed seats with ashtrays, the peeling art-deco ceilings lined with partially-fused stars, the handful of silhouetted patrons sprouting out of the stalls like tombstones, the bored ice-cream girls with illuminated trays – but cinematically speaking I'm a child of the sixties,

a two-tone suit looking very pleased with himself. This is what the copy beside it said:

## YOUR SCHEDULE AS A CINEMA MANAGER

### Friday

A chance for you to see your new film

### Saturday

Meet and greet visiting film stars on publicity tours

### Sunday

Check confectionary stand and re-reorder ice creams

### Monday

Pensioners' matinees will keep you on your toes!

### Tuesday

Cinema hygiene check – another chance to see your film

### Wednesday

Your day off, and a well-earned rest!

This, I thought, is a piece of piss. I will be a cinema manager. Bad timing, as it turned out.

## LOSING THE PLOT

My father and I went twice a week on Mondays and Fridays, because the programmes used to change on Thursdays. The ABC Blackheath and the Greenwich Granada were both within walking distance of our house, but we always managed to miss the beginning of the support feature. I saw thousands of films minus the first twenty minutes, and was forced to extem-



porise some sort of plot device that would place the characters in the situation we found them in upon arrival. The one that confounded me most was *They Came to Rob Las Vegas*, because by the time my father and I had seated ourselves, the on-screen performers were inside an armoured car that appeared to have sunk underneath the desert sand. For the life of me, I could not work out how they had got themselves into this situation. As the film never turns up on television, I am still at a loss to explain what they were doing there.

My father's taste ran to Elvis movies (of which there seemed to be several hundred, all exactly the same), late-period Jerry Lewis movies, when he was even more shrill and imbecilic, Hammer horrors (an entirely different experience when projected in the correct ratio on a huge screen), and films shot in Cinarama, including *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, with its sweeping cyanic skies, primary-coloured saloon cars and the kind of deafening wanton destruction that propels you through a feverish adolescent crush on all things loud, bright and American. On Sundays there were ancient double-bills, usually St Trinians, Norman Wisdom and Carry On films designed to test the faith of the most devout cinemagoer. My mother had genteel tastes; the first two films we saw together were *Tom Thumb* and George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*. At the same time, dubbed Italian films were running on the lower halves of double bills, including *giallos* like *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* and sf-tinged capers such as *Danger: Diabolik*. Peculiar US horror bills cropped up in cinemas that were far too grand to support such low production values. This anomaly became apparent when I noticed that the cinema walls were more glamorous than the film sets.

## SEEING DOUBLES

Still, I hold a special fondness for afternoons spent watching *Wait Until Dark* paired with *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* and *Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice?* teamed with *The Possession of Joel Delaney*. Given this alarming melange of influences, it's surprising I didn't abandon the cinema altogether and simply become a serial killer. I kept a diary through those years, cataloguing and rating every single film I saw through my adolescence. I notice that *Eye of the Cat*, in which Michael Sarrazin played an aluropobe attempting to steal a fortune from a house filled with felines, got a four-star rating. I find it astonishing that the films which influenced me are precisely the kind one would expect the DVD companies to unearth and restore, and yet they don't. I can't even find a listing for another double bill, *The Strange Vengeance of Rosalie* and *To Kill a Clown*. Perhaps the films that first gained access to my soul tell you less about the state of the

film industry in the seventies, and more about how easy it was to influence an impressionable adolescent with time on his hands.

## HOMAGE TO CATATONIA

Visuals had less influence on me than plot machinations, and individual scenes spring to mind because of the story twists they involved; Audrey Hepburn smashing lightbulbs with a walking stick in *Wait Until Dark*, Mia Farrow piecing together an ominous scabble clue in *Rosemary's Baby* and Ian Olgilvy driving his horse on in *Witchfinder General* meant more than iconic shots of Peter Fonda riding his long-forked hog in *Easy Rider*, the convulsing bullet-riddled bodies of *Bonnie and Clyde* or the slow-motion heroics of *The Wild Bunch*. I vividly recall Hywel Bennet's baby-voiced psycho menacing Hayley Mills (!) in *Twisted Nerve*, but was untouched by the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* because they were so slow and stupid. A surprisingly large number of influential films at that time were British. The raising to iconographic status of UK actors often seemed to be quite accidental. At a screening of *The Innocents*, a member of the audience praised the director Jack Clayton for choosing to shoot the most disturbing moments of the film with blurred edges. Clayton was nonplussed. He'd only done it, he explained, because he'd found out he was to be shooting widescreen after the sets were built, and some of the walls wouldn't go right to the edges of the frame.

The films that were hits with children seemed just as accidental. Very little back-up product surrounded them, which isn't surprising when you consider that – with the exception of Disney – the merchandising and licencing departments of UK film companies are only twelve years old. So you and I were left to discover films a little more, and that gave us a broader range of influences. Regardless of its quality, *The Grinch* will become an indelible memory

## CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

for toddlers by its sheer ubiquity. Compare Jim Carrey's opus to the other Dr Seuss movie, *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr T*, and you'll see just how catatonic the process has become. One thing is certain: it will be the number of prints that decide the dreams of a future generation, not the quirky convergence of image, performance or plot.

Christopher Fowler is well known for his novels and short stories, but perhaps less well known for his work in the Creative Partnership, which makes trailers for films. Chris's new regular column for TTA continues next issue.







# HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Michael Powell's sense of magic elevates his films above period, above cultural associations, into cinema's throne room. **By Roger Keen**

Although Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger took joint credit for producing, writing and directing in most of the films they made together, their roles were always clearly demarked: Pressburger wrote and Powell directed. The ideas and sensibilities behind the films they shared, and together they were a two-headed auteur, a filmic Gilbert and George. Theirs was one of the great collaborations in movie history.

They came together shortly before World War II, and made their names on propaganda pictures, such as *49th Parallel* and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*; but a special chemistry was brewing, and their films started to show a mythic edge together with playful flourishes and a quirkiness of style. *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* is far from being a conventional war film; and *A Matter of Life and Death* is both a war film and a tour de force of fantasy and surrealism.

Looked at now Powell/Pressburger films display a dated, stiff-upper-lipped Britishness which is sometimes comical. This is further underlined by their predilection for ageing, rather lumpish leading men: Roger Livesey, Marius Goring, David Farrar. Yet Britishness was coupled with a taste for the artistic and the otherworldly which was altogether more European, and puts Powell in parallel with directors such as Cocteau, Bunuel and Resnais. His pioneering work in forging films as colour, design and music spectacles marks him absolutely as an artist. And in his sense of the phantasmagoric in place, using both actual landscapes, such as the Kent countryside in *A Canterbury Tale* or the Western Isles of Scotland in *I Know Where I'm Going*; and sets, such as Heaven and its environs in *A Matter of Life and Death*, or the heights and jungles of the Himalayas in *Black Narcissus*, or the ever expanding stage on which the Red Shoes ballet is performed, Powell revealed them as magical places, the topography of a continuous unique dream world which he inhabited, his head in the clouds. It is this sense of magic, brilliantly realised on a technical level in the films, which elevates them above period, above cultural associations, into cinema's throne room.

It is fascinating and deeply gratifying that such films ever got to be made. As Martin Scorsese said in a television interview, laughing as he spoke, Powell and Pressburger were "...almost experimental filmmakers, working inside a totally commercial system." This sums it up. What experimental filmmakers would have the resources to build Heaven on Stage 4 at Rank's Denham Studios – then the largest stage in Europe – and fill it with hundreds of extras in a potpourri of historical costumes from different periods? And what commercial filmmakers of 1946 would have the inspiration to do such a thing?

Born in 1905, Mickey Powell started young in the film business, assisting the silent director Rex Ingram in the South of France. He returned to England at the dawn of the sound era, and before meeting Emeric Pressburger in 1937 he directed some twenty-four films, mainly 'quota-quickies' and potboilers. His best and latest work, *Edge of the World*, about tensions on a Shetland Island, caught the eye of Alexander Korda, then emerging as a major mogul. Pressburger, a Hungarian Jew who'd fled Hitler's advance, was already estab-



lished as one of Korda's top writers. At Denham Studios, Korda teamed up the two men to work on *The Spy in Black*, a World War I thriller with a quirky plot, which was very successful after its timely release early in WWII. The two became friends and found they were made for one another – Powell the ambitious director who wanted to make serious films, and Pressburger the European writer who was into poetry and philosophy as well as entertainment.

Just before the war Powell got another big break when Korda asked him to co-direct on what would come to be recognised as a great and hugely influential film. Based on an Arabian Nights tale of treachery, love and magic, *The Thief of Bagdad* was an epic, big budget fantasy – the *Star Wars* of its day. It is a film of ravishing visual distinction. The gaudy saturated colours of George Perinal's luscious photography are those of story books and fantastic art. The swashbuckling live action only barely keeps at bay the impressionism of the elaborate painted sets and backdrops, constantly pulling you into reverie. The welter of special effects scenes, such as a forty-foot djinn materializing out of a bottle, a fight with a giant spider, flying carpets and horses, superb back-projection and matte-work, are as enthralling and convincing as any contemporary digital work. In fact *The Thief of Bagdad* defined an iconographic mode which Powell was to distil and transfuse into the best of his subsequent films – most exquisitely so in the Red Shoes ballet sequence. Moreover the fabulist nature of the tale – a throne and a love lost and won back with the help of a youthful hero – would decisively influence Powell's storytelling.

After the outbreak of war Powell and Pressburger got down to making pictures for the war effort, under the eye of the Ministry of Information. As a production unit they steadily grew in importance, and they gave themselves a name – the Archers – together with a logo – the familiar arrows thudding into a target. In 1942 Rank took over Denham studios, and with them the Archers embarked on a much bigger and grander war picture, one which met with disapproval from the Ministry of Information – and Churchill himself – because of its theme of long friendship between a British and a German officer, and its criticism of the establishment old guard.

*The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* starts with General Clive Wynne-Candy, played by Roger Livesey, effectively aged with a bald head and walrus moustache, taken captive by a young officer during a Home Guard exercise. From here the film flashes back to Candy's younger days, in 1902, where he fought a duel, then covers his WWI service before returning to the WWII present. *Blimp* is a good illustration of the Powell and Pressburger film in transition between the wartime jobbing pictures they started with, and the uniquely auteured cinema they developed onto. Though larger in scale, the visual texture and the use of trickery remain unambitious. It was made in colour but doesn't use colour to much artistic effect; however the bluey-magenta WWI battlefields do have an otherworldly radiance. Passage of time is indicated by jump-cutting Candy's hunting trophies onto the walls of his den, and Deborah Kerr appears as three characters, forever young,

in each of three periods dealt with in Candy's life. These are nice touches, but hardly groundbreaking innovations. *Blimp's* story is an attempt at forging a modern fable, but its messages – it is at times anti-war but also anti-Nazi – are garbled. Yet overall *Blimp* remains a strikingly different film, a departure into new idiosyncratic territory; and in their next two films Powell and Pressburger would be more successful at imposing fabulist structure onto contemporary narrative.

Early on in *A Canterbury Tale* there is a cut-on-association which Kubrick might have admired – a Chaucerian falcon displaced by a WWII Spitfire. This cut provides the template for the rest of the film, where three 'pilgrims' – a British army sergeant, an American sergeant and a land girl – find their way along the ancient trail to Canterbury, with the guidance of local magistrate and historian Thomas Culpepper – a striking performance from Eric Portman. There, in and around the luminous, mighty cathedral, they receive 'blessings' in the form of fortuitous encounters. Though the final part of the film is truly moving, audiences didn't respond to its sophisticated multilayered

below: *A Matter of Life and Death*





subtleties, and it was deemed a failure. This was due in part to its odd subplot, where Culpepper indulges in the perverse activity of pouring glue onto girls' heads, under cover of the blackout, in order to discourage them from fraternizing with soldiers. The pilgrims turn detective and uncover Culpepper as the culprit, but they continue to like him. Basically the film was too far ahead of its time – more like a psychologically-aware 60s piece than a wartime one. Now it is regarded as one of Powell and Pressburger's best.

*I Know Where I'm Going* contains more of the quirky touches we know and love in Archers films. The opening credits appear as integrated text on physical objects within the scenes, such as the names on a milk float and a plaque on factory gates. Steam comes out of a top hat on a station platform, and the way Joan Webster's dreams of Scottish romance mesh with the night train locomotive wheels is delightful. The plot is a pure adult fairytale. Joan (Wendy Hiller) sets out to marry

below: filming *Black Narcissus*



her rich fiancé who resides on a remote Scottish island, but a prolonged storm keeps her on the mainland, where she unwittingly falls in love with impoverished laird Torquill MacNeil (Roger Livesey). After a life-endangering attempt to get to the island while the storm still rages, she succumbs and accepts that love must reign over money. In a final fabular twist, MacNeil discovers that the curse which has rested on his family for generations has a silver lining. It is a wonderful, charming film, and one can almost believe in Roger Livesey as a dashing young Highland blade.

In their next film the Archers got the casting of the leading man just right in David Niven, who combined Britishness with real film star charisma, and gave his finest screen performance as the endearing and batty Peter Carter. *A Matter of Life and Death* was the first Powell and Pressburger masterpiece. Their quirky inventiveness and mythic brand of storytelling had been slowly incrementing throughout the work, and now it reached a critical mass where it took a giant leap into the creation of an entirely new kind of film.

Bomber pilot Carter miraculously escapes death when he bales out of his stricken aircraft without a parachute. He washes up on a beach, and in another miracle he meets June (Kim Hunter), the pretty wireless operator with whom he'd conversed in the air, and falls in love. But early on we realize this no ordinary war adventure when we casually cut to Heaven's entrance lobby, where Flying Officer Trubshawe, deceased, one of Carter's crew, is waiting for his CO. It transpires that a celestial mistake has taken place, and Carter should have died but slipped through because of the fog. An emissary, the effete 18th Century dandy Conductor 71 (Marius Goring), is sent to Earth to remonstrate with Carter, who lodges an appeal, initiating a full scale heavenly trial to decide his fate.

*A Matter of Life and Death* is possibly the most successful full-length surrealist movie ever made. Successful in the sense that the logic of its structure survives impeccably to the last frame whilst providing a geometrically perfect platform for its otherworldly imagery. Peter Carter's eschatological adventures could be a highly organized hallucination derived from a neurological disorder brought on by his jump, or they could be 'real'; ultimately it doesn't matter, so the two worlds co-exist without strain. And the story is marvellous achieved as a piece of technical film making.

For the first time the Archers used the brilliant cinematographer and Technicolor expert Jack Cardiff, who did much to enhance the film's visual bravura. Cardiff went on to photograph their next two projects – *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes* – winning an Oscar for the former. It was envisaged that the earthly scenes should be shot in colour and the heavenly in black and white, but Cardiff advised Powell to use monochrome instead (Technicolor without the dyes), which gave Heaven its highly appropriate 'pearly' quality, and made it possible to bleed colour in and out seamlessly in the transitions between the worlds. The other big contributor was designer Alfred Junge, who was responsible for the spotless, expressionistic Heaven and the legendary moving stairway to Heaven, lined with busts of the famous, and top and tailed by false perspective paintings, mak-





above: rehearsing *The Red Shoes*

ing it reach to infinity. Add to that the cosmic painted backdrops, plus the naive 40s sfx, and you have a mysterious artistic quality that makes the film magical.

This facility of high technical perfection which the Archers now had at their disposal was used to its ultimate in *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes*, and those two films together with *A Matter of Life and Death* form the three points on the crown of their achievement.

*Black Narcissus* is set in a remote Himalayan village, but was shot entirely in Surrey ornamental gardens and in the studio. The Himalayas were painted on glass behind the sets, and matting was used where necessary. It gives the film an air which is both chocolate-boxy and strangely authentic; the marriage of photography and design works so well one feels the Himalayan atmosphere in every shot. This arrangement gave Powell huge creative freedom, and he was able to execute the film as an opera of drama, colour and music, without having to worry about the problems posed by real mountains with real weather!

The story, based on a Rumer Godden novel, is a remarkable one, dealing with the somewhat outré subject of sexual jealousy among nuns. A small order, led by Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), take over a mountain palace and found a school and hospital therein. Friction soon develops between Clodagh and Mr Dean, the local agent (David Farrar), who lives a wayward lifestyle yet is the nuns' main point of contact and source of support

within the local community. The mountain air has a peculiar effect on the nuns, and the most unstable of the group, Sister Ruth – devastatingly played by Kathleen Byron – manifests an obsessive desire for Dean, coupled with a belief that he and Clodagh have something between them. Soon Ruth becomes hysterical, sheds her habit for a seductive dress and red lipstick, and escapes the palace and her nunhood. Rejected by Dean, she attempts to murder Clodagh by pushing her off the mountain, but falls herself in the struggle. The irony is that the attraction which Ruth suspected is true, though it remains unfulfilled.

The explosive drama is conveyed through juxtaposing big close-ups of mad eyes and red lips, with white habits in windswept bluish panoramas, the hot and the cold, all set to Brian Easdale's rhapsodic score. Colour, design and music become a palette which Powell uses like Renoir or Matisse to stunning effect. And in *The Red Shoes*, the Archers' most celebrated film, these elements were to reach their artistic apotheosis.

*The Red Shoes* plot pivots upon the rather silly, and what we would now describe as 'sexist' notion that a woman cannot have both a successful career and a successful relationship; and Marius Goring, sporting a truly terrible haircut, is miscast in the romantic leading role of mercurial composer Julian Craster. Yet despite these shortcomings it still remains the most profoundly beautiful film in cinema.

Ballerina Vicky Page (Moira Shearer), together





clockwise from above left:  
**The Red Shoes, I Know Where  
I'm Going, The Red Shoes**

opposite:  
**The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp**

with Craster, fall under the wing of Diaghilev-like impresario Boris Lermontov – said to be a portrait of Korda, and played to measured perfection by Anton Walbrook. Lermontov uses Page and Craster to create a new ballet, the *Red Shoes*, which is a great success and establishes both as stars. All is well until their mentor discovers that the two have become lovers. In a jealous fury, Lermontov picks a fight with Craster and expels him from the company, and Page leaves too. Lermontov eventually wins her back, but at a terrible cost.

It sounds like a conventional enough melodrama, and might have been in the hands of anyone other than an artist like Powell. He wanted to make *The Red Shoes* much more than just another dance movie, so he asked his collaborators to help him go further than ever before. For everything to work they needed to create a *trompe l'oeil* ballet based around the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale about a girl who puts on a pair of red shoes and dances, only to find that she cannot stop, the red shoes won't let her, so she goes on and on till she dies. A ballet needs a score, and composer Brian Easdale, who did such good work on *Black Narcissus*, came up with one which is so entirely convincing one swears it must be from an actual ballet. Next a ballet needs dancers and choreography, and in securing top professionals Moira Shearer, Robert Helpmann and Leonide Massine, and getting them to act so well, Powell pulled off an unparalleled coup.

Powell decided that he wasn't going to shoot

the ballet on stage, as viewed by an audience, but instead would turn it into a piece of pure film with no conventional limits, creating a fantasy ballet spectacular involving many phases and sfx scenes, linked together into a continuous seventeen minute routine – a colossal amount of screen time for such an enterprise. So Vicky Page dances unstoppably night and day through Hein Heckroth's dazzling array of sets and costumes, encompassing carnival and bohemian scenes, fugitive fairytale landscapes, grand palatial interior, her partners turning to cellophane men, to newspaper cut-out men, and back again. Momentarily the figures of Lermontov and Craster appear superimposed upon the Shoemaker, and when Vicky turns to the auditorium there is no one there except Craster conducting, and finally the sea crashes in on the stage and turns to applause. So we are witnessing not just the ballet itself, but Vicky's psychodrama – what performing it means to her.

By overlaying the techniques of film onto those of ballet, Powell achieves a breathtaking compression of time, space and event into a masterly metaphorical language. The *Red Shoes* stand for potential, talent, achievement, destiny; yet they also stand for obsession, greed, denial, and ultimately self-destruction. The hastily contrived tragedy of the film's ending feels a little botched, and the blending of the *Red Shoes* myth with Vicky's real life runaway dance to her death is less successful without the ballet to guide it. Still the ballet sequence rests at the heart of the film, an undim-



mable cinematic jewel, which has had huge influence – most notably on the way musicals were constructed. Gene Kelly for one loved the film, and *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain* wouldn't have been the same without *The Red Shoes*.

But J Arthur Rank didn't like the film he'd financed, and he released it hurriedly, with little publicity, fearing an embarrassing flop. The dread words 'art movie' hung over its head, and like *Citizen Kane* and *It's A Wonderful Life*, it would take time for *The Red Shoes* to become established as one of the great films. Rank's pusillanimity soured his hitherto excellent relationship with Powell and Pressburger, and they went back to Korda and made a string of films for him. These include *The Small Back Room*, a noir thriller about wartime boffins which contains a dazzling expressionist nightmare sequence; *The Elusive Pimpernel*, a reworking of the Orczy tale which Powell had been reluctant to take on; *Gone to Earth*, a period drama about a country girl who has an affair with the squire and suffers a fate too similar to Vicky Page's; and *The Tales of Hoffmann*, an attempt to do with opera what the Archers had done with ballet in *The Red Shoes*, using many of the same cast and crew. *Hoffmann* has a rich visual texture and many interesting sfx, but it lacks the majestic sweep and cohesiveness of *The Red Shoes* narrative, and it wasn't popular. In truth none of these projects had the same inspirational verve or screen magic as the earlier ones, and it is clear that with *The Red Shoes* Powell and Pressburger had peaked as a creative team. They were to come full circle, ending their collaboration as they'd started, with a couple of conventional war films: *The Battle of the River Plate* and *Ill Met By Moonlight*. Both were rather turgid pieces, and no follow-up offers were forthcoming.

Away from the paternalism of the studio system, Powell drifted. He made one film in three years, *Honeymoon*, a Spanish co-produced ballet piece which is now forgotten. Then he met Leo Marks, a screenwriter with an intellect to match Pressburger's, but whose current script was not remotely Pressburger material. *Peeping Tom* was the film which took Powell's career from an unpromising position and plunged it into the depths of hopelessness. The fall in Powell's fortunes is evident there on the screen. *Peeping Tom* is a low budget movie, devoid of the high photographic and design input which is the hallmark of his classic work. Yet Powell achieves so much through pure direction – in the apt use of angles and viewpoints, in creating fear by implication, and in getting fine performances out of his actors. The sinister deployment of filmmaking paraphernalia as the weaponry of a diseased psyche pervades the film with chilling latent horror. And the opening big close up of Mark's eye followed by the viewfinder POV of his stalking camera, set a style which would be imitated again and again in the slasher genre.

Mark Lewis (Carl Bohm) is a film focus puller and compulsive home moviemaker; but his activities also extend to impaling women with a sharpened tripod leg, whilst filming them watching their own distressed faces in a reflector as they die. But it is the film's mission to explain *why* he does this, and not to exploit the material for any form of sicko gratification. Mark's deviant use of

the filmmaking process is presented as a neurosis stemming from his father's similarly filmed abuse of him as a child, where he was the guinea pig in experiments to determine the effects of fear on the nervous system. By deconstructing Mark's motivations, the film invites sympathy for him, and this was too much for the cinemagoers and critics of 1960, who rose up in a combined outpouring of disgust. But somehow the film lacks real visceral horror, because what Mark does is quite unlike what real sadistic murderers do; it is more a fantasy symbolization of dysfunction, which in the storytelling context works excellently. Unfortunately they didn't get it back then.

Powell's post-*Peeping Tom* film career is a sorry and patchy affair; it is a great tragedy that such a talent went so irrecoverably into a tailspin to a premature demise. As an outcast in a vastly changed business he had to pick up crumbs. There was jobbing work as a TV director, there were a number of nowhere film projects, and there were two Australian films, a zany comedy *They're a Weird Mob*, and *Age of Consent*, a beach-romance story concerning a middle-aged artist (James Mason) and his young muse (Helen Mirren). This film has a light, sparkling quality and some of the old Powell magic in the merging of artistic endeavour and film. The underwater nude swimming scenes bear an uncanny resemblance to those in Roeg's *Walkabout*, made shortly afterwards, and, as this would prove to be Powell's last feature, they register as a kind of baton change between an old and a new master.

Another putative film involving Mason, an adaptation by Powell himself of *The Tempest*, was scuppered by Rank's withdrawal of cooperation. The experience finished Powell as a filmmaker, and he retired into obscurity and penury. Then in the mid-70s a turning point occurred, due to a fortuitous meeting with his most illustrious fan: New York film director Martin Scorsese. As a child Scorsese had seen *The Red Shoes* and other Archers films and they'd become his favourites, influencing his own style – particularly visible in the rhapsodies of music and colour in the early work *Mean Streets*. And by this time a new generation of fans was out there waiting to discover Powell and Pressburger films, which like the best wine had now matured to vintage status.

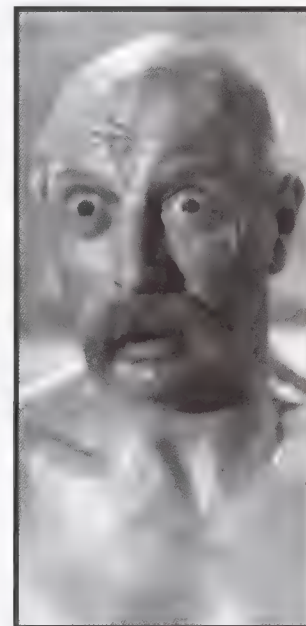
Scorsese befriended Powell and paved the way for a move to America, where he taught for a time at Dartmouth University, then worked as a consultant for Coppola at the tail end of the Zoetrope days. In 1981 Powell and Pressburger were presented with a 'long overdue' BAFTA Fellowship; *Arena* did a retrospective documentary, and many of their films were aired on TV. Once again they were household names, and when Powell died of cancer in 1990 he was mourned as one of the few true geniuses of British cinema.

In the age of video and now DVD, Powell's films continue to be watched and loved, having stood the greatest test, which is the test of time. The best of them are now over fifty years old and still exhibit qualities unsurpassed by modern cinematic art or technique. They stand up to repeated and careful viewing, and many are used as teaching aids on film studies courses, particularly in America. In its own special way each one is a gem.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 1937 **The Edge of the World** <sup>v</sup>
- 1939 **The Lion Has Wings**  
(with Adrian Brunel & others) <sup>v</sup>
- The Spy in Black**  
(with Emeric Pressburger) <sup>v</sup>
- 1940 **The Thief of Bagdad**  
(with Ludwig Berger & Tim Whelan) <sup>v</sup>
- Contraband** (with EP)
- 1941 **49th Parallel** (with EP)
- 1942 **One of Our Aircraft is Missing**  
(with EP) <sup>v</sup>
- 1943 **The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp** (with EP) <sup>v, d</sup>
- 1944 **A Canterbury Tale** (with EP) <sup>v, d</sup>
- 1945 **I Know Where I'm Going**  
(with EP) <sup>v</sup>
- 1946 **A Matter of Life and Death**  
(with EP) <sup>v, d</sup>
- 1947 **Black Narcissus** (with EP) <sup>v, d</sup>
- 1948 **The Red Shoes** (with EP) <sup>v, d</sup>
- 1949 **The Small Back Room** (with EP) <sup>v</sup>
- 1950 **Gone to Earth** (with EP)
- The Elusive Pimpernel** (with EP)
- 1951 **The Tales of Hoffmann**  
(with EP) <sup>v</sup>
- 1955 **Oh... Rosalinda!!** (with EP)
- 1956 **The Battle of the River Plate**  
(with EP) <sup>d</sup>
- 1957 **Ill Met By Moonlight** (with EP)
- 1959 **Honeymoon**
- 1960 **Peeping Tom** <sup>v</sup>
- 1966 **They're a Weird Mob**
- 1968 **Sebastian**
- 1969 **Age of Consent** <sup>v</sup>

Known availability: <sup>v</sup> video, <sup>d</sup> DVD





# ALL CATS

## Augmented reality.

Or rather (this, surely, is the main point), Augmented Reality™.

Not, when push comes to shove, a new idea. You came across 'AR' in the Nineties. You even wrote about it, when you interviewed Richard Kitney for the UK edition of *Wired*. He was stringing together the technological bells and whistles for Imperial College's new medical school. He explained AR like this:

Put a pair of goggles on. The goggles have see-through lenses, and you can see out of them perfectly well. But the goggles have a number of secrets built into them. The first of these secrets is a camera. This camera tracks the motions of your eyeballs as you work.

That information is sent, via a cable or a radio link, to a computer. The computer, in turn, projects images onto the partly silvered surface of your goggles. It's a kind of head-up display, but of a very special sort. Because the computer knows where you're looking, it can paste images onto your goggles in such a way that the images appear to you to blend seamlessly with your surroundings.

Imagine conducting keyhole surgery. You don't know whether to look at your hands, or your instruments, where they disappear inside the incision, or at the ultrasound monitor which is showing you what you're up to in there, inside that patient of yours — it's a mess, frankly. Your attention is scattered and diffused.

Now put on those goggles. Now the computer can paste ultrasound images over your glasses in such a way, it appears to you that you're actually looking *through* the patient's body. Effectively, it gives you X-ray eyes. You can see what you're doing. You're focused.

You heard all this, and drifted off. You thought: why stop at surgeons? Why not give such goggles to everyone? That way we might all augment our worlds!

With goggles on, and images enough, the everyday becomes a canvas for us all. You might paste Gormenghast over Pall Mall, or sew Dickens's London in glimpses down Fleet Street. Driving to Edinburgh for work, you might choose to give it the skyline Stevenson knew and loved. Tourist companies might equip coach windows with gigantic apparatus, giving their charges, as they drive into Budapest, glimpses of Patrick Fermor's pre-War Hungary.

You thought: put goggles on, and every day becomes an adventure in new territory. You might go shopping in the drowned London of Wyndham's *The Kraken Wakes*. Or catch a plane to *Blade Runner*'s LA. Or make a Narnia of Birmingham; an Oz of the New Forest. Or erect Middle Earth on Salisbury Plain!

You thought: why stop at vision? Why not augment sound — the wind in Camelot's pennons, the savage grunt of orcs, the songs of Sirens?

You thought: map fantasy over reality. Free the world of physical constraints. Build Lang's Metropolis on Earth!

Keanu Reeves.

Or rather (this, surely, is the main point), Keanu Reeves™.

Keanu Reeves says: "It's about the price that family exacts,

and the ties that bind."

He says, "Ultimately, it's about having the courage to heal."

He says: "*Empire* says: 'A triumph'."

He leans forward, eager, earnest, his foot an inch away from yours in the packed and airless carriage. If you kicked him, your foot would go straight through.

He says: "*The Makeover* screens at your local cinema at 7:15 this evening. If you bring a lady friend, she gets in for free."

Around him, bleeding away from his sleek outline, his surprisingly distinguished face, the real occupier of the seat stands up. His head emerges from Keanu's head, a crocodile cracking through the egg. His arms emerge, Shiva-like, from out of Keanu's arms. They wave about, collecting newspaper, satchel, umbrella. For a second the men, Keanu and the stranger, coexist in mythic form. Then, his pitch complete, Keanu fractures, winks, and vanishes. The stranger, oblivious, shucks on his coat.

You're crossing Blackfriars Bridge now. Golden Arches glint upon a gellid Thames. You're nearly there.

AR's different to VR: less ambitious, more insidious.

If VR's crack cocaine, spiriting you away to NeverNeverLand, then AR is a cigarette, heightening the present moment. Social. Assimilable. Ignorable. Almost.

Once, long before these current wonders came to pass — Keanu Reeves™; the golden arches of MacDonalds, joining St Pauls to the Tate; all the rest — you imagined AR making the very air magical. You pictured it paving the streets with fool's gold. You pictured Steerpike learing at you from round every corner, Gloriana cavorting with her apes in Green Park, Karl Marx with a bag of broken bread on Speaker's Corner, teasing the pigeons.

But then again, you were not so very naive.

You knew in your heart that dreams like these have been around for centuries. That they are, finally, all one dream: that a state of Grace might one day visit itself upon the Earth, a Rapture, a Millennium.

You did a Masters course once, at the British Film Institute, imagining, in your mid-twenties, that you might make a film one day.

(*To will implies delay, therefore now do*, Donne wrote — 'one day' festers in you still.)

There, in the BFI library, you came upon the writings of the Russian film theorist Dziga Vertov. In his day, Vertov wrote about the movie camera the way, in your own recent past, Rushkoff, Sterling and the rest sang their praises of AR.

*That it will free us of the constraints of Time, Space, and the Body!*

But of course it never does: not cinema, not radio, not internet, not VR. Not AR.

At best, such dreams inspire clever toys — and you are not too proud to play. You touch your spectacles more firmly to your nose, and roll the menu wheel there: Blackfriars Bridge Pont-Neufs before you as you walk to work. A second touch, and nearby King's Reach Tower — the high-rise where you



# ARE GREY

work — morphs to a Sacre Coeur. More fussing, and a shareware programme you picked up from a magazine melts those blessed Thames-spanning Golden Arches into rainbows.

One last refinement, a little something you picked up from a university server last night: Zeppellins cast false shadows at your feet.

This little of your dream remains: a menu of anachronisms.

You knew that in the end, AR would belong to the Sonys of the world. The Dreamcasts, and the Microsofts.

That's why you didn't do anything about it.

That's why you let it go.

The newspaper winks at you, from the fist of a man in a black operatic cloak, like the one George Macready wore in King Vidor's *Gilda*. The headline tells you Laura Hoyle is dead.

The news sinks in slowly: a stiletto through your back. It turns your blood to day-old bathwater. It chills you to the bone. You wave your hand towards the vendor as your paths meet, halfway across the bridge. The paper copies itself and unfolds itself before you — look, no hands.

Laura Hoyle is dead.

Day-old bathwater, cold and soapy — it pools in your legs, your heavy feet, leaving none for you to swallow.

Laura Hoyle is dead.

Next week her latest, *Headstrong*, has its London premiere. Next week, she comes to town. You have the ticket in the pocket of your coat, pressed there against your heart. Your NUJ badge. Your TVWow! press card.

Laura Hoyle is dead.

You tear your spectacles off, and the newspaper vanishes. Zeppellins explode like flowers, and the Pont Neuf's stonework folds itself up in the iron curlicues of Blackfriars Bridge.

But even with your goggles put away, the Real somehow eludes you, and you reach the tower where TVWow! shares office space with *Model Mania* and *Trek Universe*, *The Modern Friend* and *Dress Code pour Hommes*, in an awful dream where every solid thing, every flag and brick and kerbstone, comes adrift and floats before you, contingent, weightless, and untrustworthy. For a moment — for a long moment — the world seems nothing but a cheap computer graphic of itself: a garish self-mockery.

The offices of TVWow! are in chaos. There's a DQM (Dead Queen Mum) on file, a DTH (Dead Thora Hird) of course. But, obviously, no DLH. She was only — what? Twenty-eight?

You lick your lizard lips: "Thirty-three," you say, to general disbelief.

Your age.

They think she's younger; you know she's not.

And even were she older, 66 or 99, it is impossible to imagine anyone ever compiling a dead-file for her. Is LH not time-proof? Is not LH all future and no past? Look at her picture, her *pictures* — is she not insouciant, all Clara Bow, all Gwyneth P?

LH, who never dropped so much as a shoe in front of the camera, and spent eight years in the wilderness convincing studios she was sexier that way? LH, who danced and sang her

way uncontested onto Rita Hayworth's long-forgotten throne?

LH who, at 33, plays women ten years her junior with ease? LH.

DLH.

The press pass flexes at your breast, a hank of hair, a flap of skin. You run into the gents and retch.

You acted with her once, in *Twelfth Night*. Malvolio and Viola.

She was 21, and already so curvaceous, during the fitting (the National Theatre had costume stores in old railway arches under Waterloo station) two dresses tore at the breast.

At the same time, there was something gangly about her, something awkward. She was one of those women who can turn heads in every window she walks past and who then, with a lazy, half-meant gesture, sends a nearby greengrocer's stall spilling across the street.

(You were there. You saw it. Berwick Street Market in June — it was pure Howard Hawks.)

The National Student Drama Festival, 1987.

(How's that for bathos?)

You were easily intimidated. You never touched her, or tried to touch her.

But it wasn't your shyness made you give up the stage. It was your ambition. Delivering the lines of others was never going to be your living. Any lines there were would be yours. You dedicated yourself to the pen (as they say).

But though you wrote prolifically, somehow the Big Ideas never came. You wrote a handful of rather futuristic thrillers, which edged around the trendy subjects of your time. You wrote for *Wired* and *New Scientist*. You had, for a while there, a certain cachet. You ran literary evenings at the Lux experimental cinema in Hoxton, and it was there that you conceived the idea of attending the BFI's film course.

Technically, you grew stronger and stronger.

But the Big Ideas still eluded you.

Somehow, all the things you found to say, in books and on the radio, were negatives. No, AR will not change the way we're governed; the way we work; the way we live. No, AR will not liberate us from the body; from Time; from Space. No, Grace will not be bestowed: not now, not ever.

No to Rapture.

No to Millennium.

It never occurred to you that maybe you should simply have surfed that dream — that a dream that's a thousand years old must contain *some* truth. And so what if, at the end of it all, Time, Space and the Body had remained unconquered? You might still have been left with a sense of fulfilment. A sense of having participated. Of being there.

(And it comes to you yet again — this has always scratched away at you — that on the day the Berlin Wall fell, you were working on a short story; your phone was off the hook; you even had your curtains drawn, to keep the glare off your Amstrad green-screen.)

You watched Laura's rise with wry envy. First, a non-speaking







role in a peculiar and forgettable Michael Douglas war film (God only knows how she landed that one). Then a BBC costume drama. Then another. Then, after years off the screens, her breakthrough: her first Hollywood.

*The Wiggle in Her Walk.*

You sat there unable to breathe, as the world took off its clothes and ran laughing into your arms.

In *TVWow!* they need insight. They're crying out for it. *Begging* for it. No shaman ever sang a soul to Dreamtime so sweetly as the team at *TVWow!*. No eulogy was ever so well-crafted. Anthony himself would blush, to hear what *TVWow!* would make of Caesar, did he only present *Countdown* in his reign.

Creation is a crude and bloody business: "The fuck she do in Ninety-Six?" one shouts, genuinely upset, his desk a sea of *Entertainment News*.

In 1996 she showreeled for numberless producers. She refused earnest parts, took glamour parts instead, but walked off the set whenever they surprised her with a nude scene. It wasn't prudishness. She simply knew where her power lay.

She got herself a 'difficult' reputation. She lost her agent. She practised her dancing. And she suffered more self-doubt in that short year than assails most of us in a lifetime.

She seemed quite lost.

You say nothing, expecting any moment that your colleagues will remember that story you once told, that self-deprecating tale, your little brush with fame.

But they don't remember. They do not turn to you. And, since you show no interest, share no insight, they find you other things to do.

(And after all, you may as well have said something. What would it have cost you? What?)

This job used to pay you enough, three days a week, that you could write what you wanted to write for the other two.

Maybe Big Ideas take more than two days a week. Maybe they take three. Maybe they take four. Anyhow, they never came.

All your friends got jobs in AR. They designed spectacles. They built VirginWorld and NikeWorld. They invited you to parties — their pet philosopher. "He told us all about this stuff in '96!"

You struggled to find something positive to say.

Soon, their conversations grew arcane. The wave went past and you were left. You told yourself the wave was false and fleeting.

All waves are.

The truth is, you refused to surf.

Three days at *TVWow!* became four. Four days became five.

You've interviewed all the greats by now. Yes, Keanu. Yes, Gwyneth. The proper, living, beating breathing ones, rather than those ridiculous, importunate AR sprites that linger round the shopping malls and hobo on the trains (any fool can speak to them).

Writing interviews for *TVWow!* is just enough of a real job, lubricated by just the barest minimum of glamour, that you'd feel churlish to complain about it. And after all, who's there to blame, if the Big Ideas were never there?

But Laura Hoyle is dead, and now you know the Big Idea

was with you, all along. You never wrote it down. Never said it out loud. You never even thought it out.

You went instead and bloody crucified yourself on it.

All Cats Are Grey.

At night all cats are grey and all women are beautiful.

Sex is in the act, and not the image.

Clutch a merely photogenic thigh, you'll find all skin and bone.

What's a perfect nose worth, when its pressed painfully against the corner of your mouth? What price lips when every word they speak, invisible and wet against your ear, remakes the world?

And yet, and yet. Every night you went to bathe in her image, first in multiplexes, then the reps; at last, with a regretful pang, on DVD (it's not the same).

*A Wiggle in Her Walk.*

*How it Feels to be Run Over* followed soon after.

Sex is in the act, and not the image — yet you could not break free.

Every time you saw her, you tried to form some connection between what you remembered of her and what you saw on the screen. Some bridge made of memory and imagination.

But you never could.

It was as though you had been living in a world of shadows, and now Hollywood had revealed to you another world, a more real world of ideal, Platonic forms.

This impossible yearning of yours proved infinitely more corrosive than any bubble of envy you may have swallowed.

But what kills you now is this: that your boring old yearning should be, after all, the Dream. The same old Dream. That thousand-year-old dream.

Why do you wear those silly spectacles?

Because through them you hope to glimpse, chinked between Nike's Swish and Coca Cola's bottle-curve, the Grace that hides behind the world.

Why do you lie awake watching late-night TV?

Same reason.

Different technology — constant self-deception.

Hand a man a magazine of the crudest pornography you like: his favourite photograph will be one of a woman simulating orgasm, her face aglow, transfigured — Mary at the Annunciation. Mary at the receiving end of a phallic Grace. Mary in Rapture. Mary at the gates of Millennium.

Laura Hoyle is dead.

Laura Hoyle is pure sex. She can make erotic the way she turns her wrists, the way she holds her head. She works lights and lenses like no one since the Hays Office shut up shop.

Laura Hoyle. She was your Big Idea.

Laura Hoyle.

Sex, transfiguration, regret, yearning, folly — Jesus, how big do you need it to be?

It is not too late.

It is not. It is not.

Laura Hoyle is dead. You are not. DLH.

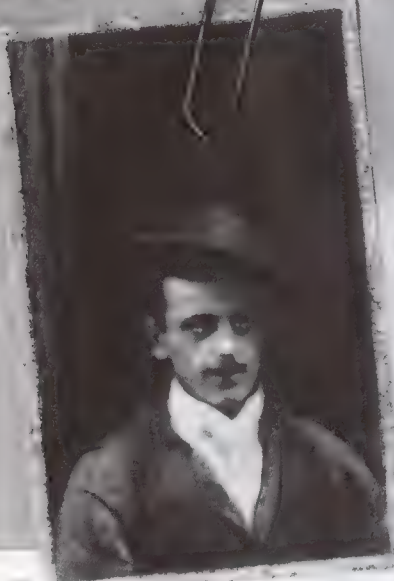
Simon Ings's current novel is *Painkillers* (Bloomsbury, £9.99), reviewed in TTA24. He lives in London.

SIMON INGS



# THE NECROPOLIS LINE

## ALEXANDER GLASS



*Corpse No. 36*

NECROPOLIS LINE



## THE CITY

was never silent, and never still. Even in the dead of night the great factories churned and groaned, ships on the river sounded their mournful cries, horses' hooves clattered over cobbled streets, voices were raised in drunken anger or in drunken song. The city grew quieter as the hours grew smaller, but still it tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Jonathan Finch knew how it felt. A sound had kept him awake through the afternoon, a sound like something breathing: slow, laboured breaths like the breaths of the sea. It took him some time to realise it was the lament of the factory that lay just across the river, sighing clouds of steam, tainting the air with the taste of metal.

A pale blue smog hung over London that night, and the moonlight, falling in through the window, was tinted a strange, sickly green. The air was warm and slow and clammy, and a sour smell was rising off the river, a stench that coated the mouth. Finch hauled himself out of bed and sat for a while with his head in his hands. Beneath his palms, he could feel the blood pulsing in his temples. He kept his eyes closed, not wanting to see any more of the room than he had to. The place reminded him of a cell. The walls were bare, a skin of pale yellow paint peeling away to reveal rough brick beneath. The moonlight was broken into pieces by five black iron bars in the window. It was, all in all, very much like a cell, in particular a cell that Finch had once known. And this time there seemed to be no way to escape.

"Finch? Are you awake?" It was the heavy, deliberate voice of Dance, the driver. He was tapping on the door with some metallic object, a key perhaps, or a knife. "Up with you. It's time for our shift."

"I'm coming," muttered Finch. And he added, as he always did: "There's no hurry. The dead won't care if the train is late."

"The Boss will care. Hurry up. I'll wait for you downstairs."

Finch had slept, or rather lain awake, in his uniform, and now there was no time to iron out the creases. He tugged his boots on without bothering to tie the laces — plenty of time for that when they were safely aboard. Then he set his cap straight on his head, rubbed at the day's growth of beard that shadowed his chin, and followed Dance out of the building, and down to the waterline.

They crossed the river over Waterloo Bridge, ran past the huge black fingers of the factory chimneys that had grown up along the North Bank, and hurried on into the station. To his relief, Finch saw that the train was not yet ready to leave. The coffins were still being loaded, each one carried respectfully, carefully, but as quickly as could be, by a pair of night porters. One porter had the butt of a cigar, its tip glowing orange, clamped between his teeth. They were almost done: the First and Second Class carriages were full. Now they were bundling the remainder into Third Class. Not all of these had coffins. Many were simply tied into sacks, their names scrawled on luggage tickets.

Four o'clock. Time to depart. Jonathan Finch ran along the length of the train, all four carriages, making sure the doors were secure. He swung his body up and into the very last door. Then he took off his guardsman's hat and waved it, a sign to Dance that they were ready to depart.

"All aboard for the Wildgrave!" he shouted, and one of the porters pulled the cigar from his mouth to let his laughter out. The orange butt traced a glowing sigil in the air.

The train moaned, the engine seething as it gathered steam. Two blasts on the whistle, and they were moving, the breaths of the engine growing shorter as it built up speed. With a deftness born of practice, Finch hopped aboard the foot-plate of the last carriage, the nails of his boots ringing on the iron stair, and was carried away into the night.

## HE HAD

worked the Necropolis line for a year and a half, ever since he'd returned from transportation. Very few people knew that he had come back. Certainly the Necropolis Railway Company had no idea of it. Dance, who knew him as well as anyone, knew the truth, but not the whole truth: Finch had never told him what his crime had been, and Dance never asked. Perhaps the driver had secrets of his own; perhaps, after spending so many nights surrounded by the dead, he had simply learned not to ask questions. The few people who did know the whole truth, well, Finch never saw them, and what was more he made damned sure they didn't see him. With one exception. One irritating exception, which gnawed at him on sleepless nights.

The job was easy, and it paid — not well, but it paid. Finch tried to save the money, a little of it at least, but it always fell through his fingers. Generally it fell straight through without his even touching it; the cupped hands of Frankie Bain caught every penny he had to spare, and a few he didn't. It was sheer bad luck that Bain had spotted him, bad luck that Bain's first cousin had died, and that her fever-ridden body had been carried away to the Necropolis, a safe distance from city. Bad luck that Finch should have been on duty when Bain took the train down to visit her grave. Of course, Finch thought ruefully, the old man had always made a living from bad luck. There must be a thousand people in the city hoping, praying, that Bain's own luck would turn bad.

Jonathan Finch no longer minded travelling with the dead. After the first week or so, he had come to enjoy their company. They were quiet, and they didn't complain. Best of all, he could trust them, each and every one of them, not to report him to the Yard.

## HE STAYED

at the rear of the train, until they passed beneath the Sycamore Gate and left London behind. This was the best part of the journey: watching the ugly shape of the city, the towers and the chimneys, disappearing into the dark. The city's sullen light could be seen for a while longer, the glow of torchlight and gas-lamps and howling chimneys, the burnished bodies of the steam-angels glinting as they flew over the city. Then all that was gone, too. He leaned out of the carriage, and the wind rushed past him, carrying away the stench of dirt and smoke and oil. These moments were the best he knew, now. He felt almost free, leaning out on the foot-plate with his face to the breeze. He thought of his wife, and how she would have loved this journey. Then something soured inside him, and he stepped back into the carriage, and slammed the door.

He made his way up to First Class, where the dead were wrapped in fresh, clean linen, the odour of their decay masked with expensive perfume. There he lit up his pipe, and a trail of blue smoke wandered around the carriage, covering up whatever rottenness remained in the air. It was only then, resting against the wall with his pipe in his hand, that he noticed the empty alcove. Or rather, the alcove that should have been empty. The velvet curtain had been pulled across it, as if a coffin was lying there; but Finch distinctly remembered that this particular space had been free.

There was always an empty bunk or two in First Class; sometimes even in Second. In Third, of course, the porters piled them in until no more could fit. Privately, Finch told himself that it would make life easier for everyone if they simply moved a few of the paupers into First Class, where there was space enough; but he knew the Necropolis Railway Company would have none of it. The effects of rank and privilege extended be-



yond the grave. When his own time came, of course, he would be riding Third Class with the rest of them — the misfits and the mad; the paupers; the murdered men, thick dark blood still stealing from their clothes; and the feverlings, their bodies no more than bundles of bones and bags of skin.

Finch stayed still, listening. There was a sound from the alcove, the sound of someone breathing. For a moment he was unnerved, imagining a corpse lying in the bunk, free of its coffin, the lids peeled away from its eyes, the lips crawling back from its yellowing teeth. A corpse waiting to feed on its fellows — or worse, waiting to feed on him. He shrugged, shaking the thought free, and with a single brisk motion drew the curtain aside.

The sight of a living man, grinning up at him from the darkened recess, was almost as shocking as the sight of a corpse would have been. Finch stared at him in silence, and the man stared back, one eyebrow raised, mocking him. It was Frankie Bain.

"Did I startle you?" he asked, softly, his voice barely audible above the rattle of the wheels. His voice was like that of a crow; his whisper was a crow's whisper. He added, flatly, "I apologise."

"I paid you. Two weeks ago." Finch could hear his voice begin to rise, in protest. "I don't owe you anything, not until the end of the month."

Bain curled his lip. His eyes were bleary, and he stank of alcohol. Cheap alcohol. Finch thought the old man would have been able to afford the good stuff. He smelled as if he had been drinking from an unmarked bottle, bought from an alley trader. Whatever it was, it seemed to have taken its toll on him: his body swayed wildly as he swung his legs out of the bunk. Other than that, he was as Finch remembered him: immaculately dressed, his bone-white hair carefully plastered down on his bone-white skull. His shoes were like two black beetles, catching the light of the carriage lantern. If anything, Bain's appearance was even more dapper than usual.

"I'm not here for my payment," the old man rasped. "That can wait. Don't say you don't owe me anything though, Finch. You always owe me. At the end of each month, and all other times too. After all, I could send word to the police any day of the month. And when you find yourself on the Tyburn tree, when they drag you screaming down Violin Road to the gallows, it could be any day of the month. Any day at all."

"You wouldn't do it. The money means too much to you."

"What would Sarah say if she could see you now?"

"All right." Finch looked away, scratching the bowl of his pipe with a thumbnail. "All right. But if you don't want paying, Bain, what do you want?"

"Mr Bain. Please. Mr Bain." The old man grinned. "I need a favour from you, Finch. Something that requires your special talents."

Finch stared at him. "What favour would that be?"

"Nothing very difficult, Finch, at least not for you. I want you to go back to your old job for the night. Just for tonight. Then you can go back to earning me money."

"No."

"No?" Bain bared his teeth. "You've no choice, Finch. You owe me a debt, and I can call in that debt any way I please. Understand? But if you like, I'll add in something extra for you." He took a deep breath through his nose, held it a moment, then let it out. "One last piece of work, and I'll let your debt lie. Not that I'll forget it. I never forget a debt unpaid. But I'll let it lie."

Finch shook his head, slowly. "How do I know that? You could still inform on me, even after I've done your work for you."

Bain said nothing. He only smiled. His teeth were parted a little; Finch caught a glimpse of a thin, brown tongue.

"The last time," he said, "I got myself caught. If I hadn't escaped, it would have been transportation. They had me — they had me in a little cell down at the docks. I remember the peeling paint and the bars on the window. Between the bars, all I could see was water." He sucked on his pipe, dragging himself back to the present. "If I get caught this time, I'll swing for it."

Bain shrugged, his face turning sour. He was bored of the conversation. "As I said. You've no choice. But I'll let you be, after. You have my word on that. For what it's worth."

"For what it's worth," Finch repeated, and offered the old man his hand. Bain's hand was cold in his own, cold as steel.

**AWAY FROM** the city, Finch found himself able to think more clearly. Though the night had deepened, darkness coiling itself about the fields, he felt more awake, more alive. He slid back the window of the First Class carriage and watched the quarter-mile posts rushing past, glowing white in the clean, bright light of the moon. Every few miles or so they would pass one of the great steam-mills, still churning through the night; but for the most part all was silent. The only sound was the roar of the train itself.

They were nearing the end of the Necropolis line. As they rounded a shallow bank, Finch caught sight of a faint glimmer, a glow of tiny lights, as if a handful of stars had fallen to Earth. Those were the lanterns of the stretch of forest called King John's Wood. At least, that was how it was marked in the official maps and charts. Ordinary people called it the Wildgrave.

"Are we there? Have we arrived?"

Bain was crouched on his bunk, his scrawny arms wrapped about his body. The cold did not seem to have cut through the veil of alcohol; but, drunk or not, Finch was wary of the old man. He made sure he could always see him, if only from the corner of an eye.

"Almost there now." Finch could smell the rich, dark scent of the forest, carried on the wind. "It's one thing to travel the line in daylight, and another to travel it at night. It still gives me the shivers sometimes, and I make the run three nights out of every seven."

Bain grunted. "They use a different train, I hope, to take the visitors during the day?"

"Yes. Lizzie for the nights, Mary for the days. Named after Dance's favourite ladies."

"This is strange work, Finch." The old man coughed. "Still, I suppose you're well suited to it. You had similar experience, after all. Did you tell them, when you went for the job?"

Finch said nothing. His hands had tightened their grip on the window's edge. The glass was cold beneath his fingertips.

"What is it you want?" he said, at last.

"One body," Bain told him, businesslike. As if he were ordering a pair of shoes. Black shoes, black as beetles' wings. "I want you to dig down into the grave."

"Which grave?"

"Number 4188. You'll remember it, I think."

"Oh, yes." He remembered it. He remembered it very well. Nearly one full year before, in the Necropolis, he had spied a familiar figure kneeling before that grave. He should have walked the other way. He should have avoided anyone who might have the slightest chance of recognising him. But something had drawn him closer. The first brown leaves had crunched beneath his boots.

Hearing his approach, Frankie Bain had looked up from the headstone. There was dirt crusting the knees of his immaculate trousers. His eyes had narrowed, first, puzzled; then they had widened. Finally, the ghost of a smile had crept around



his mouth. He had risen to his feet, grave number 4188 forgotten, a terrible thought kindling in his eyes. He had looked something like a corpse himself, as pale as a ghost, the teeth rattling in his mouth like hard yellow stones.

After that, Jonathan Finch had found himself a prisoner again.

"Your cousin," muttered Finch. "There'll be little enough left of her, Bain. Mr Bain, I should say. It's a year she's been there. In the ground. With worms in her eyes."

He had expected Bain to be angry, hoped that he'd be angry, but the old man only shrugged. "If you say so, Finch. If you say so. You know more about these things than I do. Being a Resurrection Man."

"Sticks and stones, Mr Bain. I'm not ashamed of anything I did."

"Desecrating holy ground? Stealing from the bodies of the dead?"

"I didn't steal from the bodies. I only sold them on."

"Very noble," the old man sneered.

"I had no choice." Finch frowned. "And if you've become all moral, why do you want me to go back to my old game? Apart from not wanting to get your own hands dirty?"

Bain was silent for a while. Then: "There's a part of the job I can't do by myself. I need a second pair of hands."

Finch shivered. He dreaded to think what that part of the job might be.

## THE GREAT

engine hissed as it cooled. They had come past the station, past the neat little platforms where the daytime visitors would alight; they had travelled on, into the heart of the Necropolis itself. To the other Necropolis Station, hidden by the trees. Here, the gravediggers and the porters were sitting about beside the tracks, finishing their drinks and their card-games, then jumping up to collect their shovels from the rickety wooden storeroom.

Finch left Bain in First Class. He left behind the scent of expensive perfume — laced now with the stink of alcohol that rose from the old man — and made his way through Second Class, with its scent of cheap rosewater. He took a breath before he reached Third Class, and held it a while, until he had thrown open the doors.

"All yours, boys. Be careful with them."

"You could give us a hand, Finch," one of the porters grumbled.

"Sorry, Walter. There's some trouble at the front end. I have to deal with it."

He doubted that they believed him, but it hardly mattered. There was nothing they could do about it. He was more worried about Dance.

He caught the driver with his lips to a bottle of Embleson's Dry Gin, and knocked the bottle aside with an oath. Dance picked it up at once, and then stared at him, waiting. A blade, with which he had opened the bottle, glinted in his other hand.

"I'm in trouble. There's someone here. In the train." Finch faltered, wondering how much he should say. "I owe him a favour, and he's called it in."

"Is it legal?"

"No." Finch looked away. "I told the porters there was something wrong with Lizzie. Can you pretend to be working on her a while? Until I get back?"

"You are coming back, then?"

"I hope so."

"All right, then." The driver shrugged, then raised his bottle in a mock toast. "Why not?"

Finch felt a smile tugging at his lips. "Doesn't anything ever surprise you?"

"In this job?" Dance looked down at the bottle in his hand. "I inherited this job, Finch. My father died. He hadn't been ill, not so you'd have noticed. But one day he just upped and died, and left me his job. Funny kind of inheritance. Suddenly I was a driver on the Necropolis line. Nothing surprises me, since then."

"I'm sorry," Finch said, and he was, though his mind was already racing ahead to grave number 4188.

"It doesn't matter." Dance took a drink. "He's buried here." He swung an arm out over the immense graveyard; the gin sloshed back and forth in the bottle. "Somewhere. I can feel him there. When someone you know is buried nearby, you can feel it. You can feel where they lie. It's like you're tied to them, and you can't get free."

Finch nodded. "I know."

**BAIN SEEMED** to have nothing more to say for himself. As they trudged along the paths between the graves, each carrying a shovel from the storeroom and a lantern from the train, Finch tried to imagine what was on the old man's mind. There seemed no reason to disturb the woman's body. Certainly there was no money to be made out of it, so long after death. He had an image of breaking open the coffin and finding a woman, perfectly preserved, lying there as if she were sleeping. Her skin silvered by the moon, against the blackness of the soil. The old man reaching down to touch her, to take her hand. Her eyes, opening.

Best not to think about such things. Best not to think at all, until the job was finished. Bain's business was his own.

A veil of mist, glowing in the light of the moon, lay over the forest floor. Unable to see where he was going, Finch tripped, and stumbled forward with a curse. He bent down to tie his laces, expecting some derisive remark from Frankie Bain; but the old man was silent. He trudged past Finch without a word, his eyes fixed on the clearing up ahead, on the harvest of stones. Finch realised, with a shiver, that in that moment he had taken his eyes from the old man. Bain could have killed him there, deep in the trees, split his head open with the shovel and left him for dead, one more body amongst a thousand. Finch felt the weight of his own shovel in his fists — a familiar weight — and pushed an evil thought away.

By the time he reached the grave, Bain was already digging. The soft, wet soil flew up from the blade of his shovel, scattering in the air and making a sound like rain as it fell back to the earth. Putting his jacket aside and rolling up his sleeves, Finch joined in the work. The two lanterns, sitting on the ground, threw long shadows out around them. Shadows of the tombs, and of the two men, swaying back and forth by the wavering light of the flames.

The night was still warm, and Finch felt the sweat gathering on his brow and creeping down beneath his collar. His shirt clung to his back. To his surprise he saw that Bain seemed to be digging away just as happily as when he began. He shovelled away the moist black earth, and with it the soft bodies of the worms, without even breaking a sweat. Finch, by now, was breathing hard, the harsh sound of it echoing in the trees; Bain was silent.

The work brought back memories. Nights spent in graveyards, seeking out the freshest graves; sweeping the wreaths and the flowers aside to get at the wealth beneath. Delivering the bodies to the back doors of surgeons, anatomists, madmen and, once, a priest. Thrusting the money into his pocket, burying it deep, before it was seen.

At last they struck something hollow and hard: coffin number 4188. Bain cleared away the soil so that the coffin lid lay



before them, like a doorway into the earth. Then he stood in silence a while, his shovel cast aside, his bony white hands clasped before him as if in prayer. Not knowing what else to do, Finch waited with him.

"There," the old man whispered at last. "That's half your task done. Half your debt set aside."

Finch shrugged, uncomfortable. His heart was stamping against his ribs, less from the exertion than from a sense that something was wrong. Bain seemed to be lost in thought, his mind wandering, his expression vague and unfocused.

"Why did you come back, Finch?"

"What?"

"Why did you return from transportation? You knew they would hang you, if they caught you. You could have gone anywhere. Cape Town. Paris. Amsterdam. New Amsterdam. Hammerfest or Hafen. Egypt or India. But instead you came back, back to London. If you had stayed away, Finch, you wouldn't have fallen into my hands."

"I know."

"You were Resurrection Man for a good few years. Did it pay?"

"Not well enough."

"Not enough for the risks you ran."

Finch shook his head impatiently. "What's the other half of the job?"

"In good time, Finch. All in good time. After tonight, you'll never see me again." He peered at Finch, a grin pinching the corners of his mouth. For a moment the old man seemed almost his old self. Still drunk, still slurring his speech, unable to keep control of his tongue; but just as malevolent, just as spiteful, as he had ever been. "Where is she buried, Finch?"

Finch said nothing.

"Sarah, I mean."

"I know who you mean. It's none of your business."

"Did she wait for you, Finch, when you were sent away? Or did she find herself another man to warm her bed?"

"She waited. Not long; she died while I was in prison." Finch closed his eyes. "When I got out, I went straight home. Stupid, of course — it was the first place they would look — but I had to see her. Then I found out she was gone. Not gone away, but gone. The fever took her. They sent her body here, to the Necropolis. Third Class," he added softly. "With all the corpses I stole, with all the corpses I sold, I couldn't give her any better than that."

Bain raised his eyes to Heaven and shook his head, in a mockery of sympathy. "Poor Finch. So loyal to her memory. If I hadn't mentioned her, back in the train, I think you wouldn't have helped me. But only speak her name, and Finch comes running." His expression soured. "Let me give you some advice."

"You can keep it," Finch replied shortly.

"I won't need it where I'm going. It is simply this: the past is done. You can't let it ensnare you. Otherwise you'll spend a lifetime tied to something that's gone."

"Very profound, I'm sure."

"No. I've no time for profundity, or cleverness, or fancy words. I'm telling you the truth though, Finch; for once I'm telling you the truth." He looked away, into the darkness beneath the trees. "But I can see you don't want to hear."

"The job, Mr Bain. I just want to finish the job."

Bain bared his teeth; it was almost a smile. "And so you shall."

He knelt down on the earth, next to the coffin, and slid his bony hands beneath the lid. Finch closed his eyes tight, and hung his head, so that even if his lids should flicker open he would see nothing of the body that lay within. Strange, he thought: I ride with them every day, but I can't bear to look

at one that's been a year below the ground. There was a moan as the lid swung open, and then a sigh. Finch suppressed a cry, thinking for a moment that the breath had come from the corpse; then he recognised Bain's voice.

"There she is, Finch. As beautiful as ever. Don't you want to look?"

Deliberately, Finch turned his face away.

"All right. I can't blame you."

There was a sound of movement. Finch realised, with horror, that the old man was climbing down into the coffin.

"Shovel the earth back in, Finch, and that's the job done. I'll trouble you no more."

Finch took a breath, then struggled for a word. "Why?" he managed.

There was a harsh sound; it might have been a laugh. "You're not the only one to return from transportation."

Then the coffin fell shut, and silence spread out over the forest.

## FINCH HUNG

from a doorway of the empty train, his face to the wind, his hair fluttering behind him. The air had turned cold, now that the night was reaching its end. Far away at the world's eastern edge, a smudge of pale light clung to the horizon, but brought no warmth and cast no shadows. Overhead the stars were vanishing, one by one.

He had filled in the grave, as Bain had told him. Partly because if it were left open, questions would be asked, and if questions were asked someone might think to look into his past; and partly because he had given the old man his word. The dead man, he thought to himself as he tipped the black earth back into the grave. If he broke his promise to a ghost — or whatever it was that Bain had become — then his promise was worth no more than the air it was spoken with.

Later, he went to the other grave, where Sarah lay resting. He sat crosslegged on the grass and spoke to her a while. He managed to say goodbye to her, and then found a tear crawling down his face, leaving a cold trail behind it.

He had made her no promises. He had not promised to come to her grave each day. Yet when he told her he was leaving, it still felt like a betrayal. He had no idea where he would go. Cape Town. Paris. Amsterdam. New Amsterdam. Hammerfest or Hafen. Egypt or India. But he knew that Sarah must stay behind.

Now, as the quarter-mile posts winked by and the heavy shape of the Sycamore gate loomed up ahead, Finch felt something lift from him. He was unsure whether it was a memory of Sarah or a memory of Frankie Bain; but by the time they entered the city it was gone. The wind had carried it away.

This was the best part of the journey: watching the magnificent shape of the city, the towers and the chimneys, rising in the early morning light. The city's own light could still be seen, the glow of torchlight and gas-lamps and howling chimneys, the glint of the iron angels drifting in the smog.

The city was waking up. People were spilling out on to the streets, their voices and their footsteps lending a weight to the air. Through the crowds, the last of the night's drinkers stumbled home, the words of half-remembered songs still falling from their lips.

The city raised its voice, to greet the day. Jonathan Finch knew how it felt.

Of this story Alex, a prolific young writer from London, says, "I can't remember where I first heard about the Necropolis Line, but I knew at once that it was crying out to be turned into a story; and I wanted to create a London that did the Line justice."



## JON COURTENAY GRIMWOOD

**redROBE**

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood**

Earthlight, £6.99

review & interview by Mark Roberts



*redRobe* is packed with vibrant characters that always threaten to dominate but somehow still work off each other to great dramatic effect. The plot is far too pacy to sum up here, but take ex-media-darling-assassins, talking guns (heavy on the attitude)/robotic monkeys, kinderwhores (replete with heat-reactive g-string), near-omnipotent pseudo-gods, a vast artificial world with dirt made of the flesh of the dead, a cardinal with scheming tendencies to put Machiavelli to shame...and you start to get an idea of the roller-coaster experience on offer.

Courtenay Grimwood has taken the constructs and tropes of cyberpunk, stripped them back to their bare bones, and rebuilt them using templates borrowed from sources as diverse as Raymond Chandler, Elmore Leonard and, latterly, Tarantino and Gibson. The result is the literary equivalent of the car/monorail chase in *The French Connection*: high speed, morally ambivalent, often tense, and tremendous fun. Nobel Prize for Literature material it ain't – but it is a seriously fast-moving piece of entertainment that those of us who simply don't read sf will enjoy regardless.

So, what about its sf/non-sf tag? What about tags at all?

**JCG:** The books I write are the books I want to write. I'm not sure what category they should fall into, but then I'm somebody who distrusts categories on instinct. One of the most interesting things about writing the novels from *neoAddix* to *redRobe* is the large number of people who can tell me what the novels are not... The sf bods say it's really slipstream, the slipstream bods say it's really cyberpunk, the cyberpunk bods say, nah, it's sf.

And actually it's none of them. As far as I'm concerned I write crime thrillers, they just happen to be set in a future where guns talk, computers are Buddhist, nanotech can rewire your brain and AIs are as irritating as your mother. My books include dance music, drugs, sex and politics, because that's what interests me. But then they've also got wheel worlds, telepathy and ghosts, albeit usually computer generated.

It'll be interesting to see what category gets put on the new series set fifty years from now in North Africa since each novel is basically a mystery, all three featuring the same detective, who may or may not be a vampyre (I'm not sure and nor is he).

**MR:** Science fiction is dead. Simple truth or nifty marketing ploy to widen the market?

**JCG:** I don't believe for a minute that

science fiction is dead, or will ever die come to that. I do think it's been mutating and I like that. A sizeable minority of people who buy my books are not sf buyers *per se*. They might be clubbers, or thriller readers, or just the post cyberpunk brigade who regard themselves as readers of a genre in its own right.

The big problem is that the term sf has become pejorative, because we're bad at saying, 'Hey wait, some of the best, most intelligent fiction around is coming out of this market.' And when a book does break through, like the utterly brilliant *Cryptomancer*, there's a tendency within the sf world to ask, 'Ah, but is it really sf?' If sf has a problem it's that the world can be inward looking. Although it's a factor, the sf ghetto is not just something imposed from outside, there's an elective form of internal exile at work as well. Plus, the term is being asked to carry everything from *Star Trek* novels to *The Sparrow*. At least crime fiction has categories like police procedural, thriller, detective fiction, capers, private eyes, etc.

As for marketing ploys, so far as I'm concerned the more people who read my books the better, and I don't give a flying fuck what the publishers, the booksellers or the reviews want to call the books just so long as they gets out there and people know they exist!

**MR:** You mention a new trilogy set in Africa. Does this mean *redRobe* is likely to be the final book set in your Napoleonic Alternate Reality?

**JCG:** No way. Axl will be back, and Mai and probably Lady Clare! I did think about sliding the two time lines into each other in the new series but decided not to, at least not yet. I do have characters crossing times, for example Passion in *Lucifer's Dragon* also exists as the vampyre Sabine a hundred years later, and then again as Passion, later still, at the start of *reMix* when she's the photojournalist stood in the rubble of the highrise that's been eaten by a nanetic virus.

*Pashazade*, the first of the Arabesk books, is also set in an alternate Napoleonic universe, because it turns on the French having won the Franco-Prussian war, with WWI being the German Empire's revenge on France (rather than the other way round). But it concentrates on the Middle East and North Africa and what's going on in Paris and Berlin is learnt almost by default. The other difference is that each of the Arabesk books is a crime novel, rather than just a straight post-cyberpunk thriller. The main character is a detective called Ashraf al-Mansur – Raf for short – who may or may not be human, a vampyre, post-human... He's not at all sure. I've literally just delivered the first book to the publisher and my editor stayed up last night to read it and seems to like it, so we'll see what happens!

**MR:** I've seen your work variously com-





pared to that of William Gibson, Quentin Tarantino and Raymond Chandler. Whose work (in any art, not just words) makes you want to create?

**JCG:** Edvard Munch. Not so much 'The Scream', effective through it is, but the woodblocks and lithographs he did in the 1890s. There's one woodblock of a woman staring out across Oslo fjord. It uses maybe three colours and manages to do her dress, the water, the sky, her hair, everything. It owes an enormous debt to Japanese art. Two of my prize possessions are a Hokusi woodblock print and a 19th century Japanese watercolour of a samurai under a cherry tree, which always reminds me of the poet Basho: 'How pleasant/ just once not to see/ Fuji through mist'.

Early Gibson had the same effect. I read *Count Zero* in one go, sitting in a cafe with my job in publishing and marriage falling apart around me and still got totally lost in the book. I actually prefer *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but I can still remember that adrenaline rush. I love Jeff Noon's work, Haruki Murakami, not to mention Dibden's *Zen* novels, which I've been buying in hardback for as long as I can remember. But the book that really matters to me is *The Master and Margarita*, by Bulgakov. The man had the misfortune to be Stalin's favourite novelist and he still had the guts and ability to write probably the most searing critique of power, using Satan, a talking cat and Jesus as bit characters.

**MR:** Decriminalising cannabis, ecstasy and LSD: about bloody time, or the end of civilisation as we know it?

**JCG:** The 'war' against drugs isn't just being lost, I strongly suspect the government actually knows it can't be won. Cannabis should be decriminalised. Sure it can kill you – well, if you smoke leaf or mix it with tobacco – and if you use skunk and drive you'll probably kill someone else as well, but that's no different to alcohol and I'd far rather see stronger laws on driving under the influence of anything, than yet more unenforceable, unenforced laws back-

ed by some rent-a-quote drugs tsar.

Decriminalising it would take it out of the hands of drugs gangs, reduce the price, up the quality and probably give the government another source of tax revenue. I've got a teenage kid and no one he knows believes it leads onto 'hard drugs' anymore than drinking lager leads onto drinking meths.

In Holland ecstasy is tested for quality which, given it's the impurities that usually kill, you would think was good news. In South London a group of kids were arrested for having a testing kit – not for having drugs but for having the kit!

Cocaine I think is an excellent idea, if only because it induces God-like delusions in money brokers that, combined with an oversimplistic reliance on forecasting software produces the occasional financial bloodbath on Wall Street or in the square mile. Heroin and crack are different, to my mind: though I'm not sure I can argue that honestly. But at a gut level the idea of legal and freely available crack or heroin scares the shit out of me. What we really need and what we're not getting is an intelligent, grown-up discussion that looks at drugs in global terms and realises that the core majority of drugs growers are using the revenue to finance politics, revolution or war.

**MR:** Modern society has lost its moral centre. There's a vacuum left by the fall of organised religion, and it's being filled by greed and selfishness, a downward spiral that can end only in the dystopian nightmare of the post-cyberpunk vision. Sound warning to an increasingly arrogant society, or doom-mongering bullshit?

**JCG:** Religion hasn't gone. It's just meshed with politics and big business. More people die from AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa than from the many wars but there are still Muslim authorities actively fighting against the establishment of condom factories, because these might 'lead to increased promiscuity'.

We've got the Catholic church holding out against contraception despite starving children and increased birth rate and rising AIDS figures. And in Britain, for our sins, we've got a PM who apparently goes ape-shit when some vaguely intelligent member of the cabinet suggests this isn't a good idea. Half of the US is baptist, more than two-thirds believe in angels. Society has lost its moral centre all right but it isn't to do with religion, unless you count global monetarism as a religion. America won the cold war, the rest of the world is still counting the cost.

Also, cyberpunk was never a reflection of the future. Like all hardboiled fiction, it's a way of dealing with the present and if post-cyberpunk is more fractured that's because it reflects what's happened to western society since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Whether or not you've already got a bit part in *Blade Runner* depends on your background, race, education and where in the world you live.

**MR:** Should the rise of technologies with an sf 'feel', for example GM food and genetic

engineering, frighten or inspire us?

**JCG:** Science is neutral, I believe. Genetic engineering could produce crops carrying a salt-tolerance gene from mangroves to let farmers in poor areas grow food on salt flats or it could produce patented crops that grow for only one season and need expensive, also patented pesticides. Given the way the World Bank and the IMF treat third world countries I wouldn't count on it being the former, but I can hope.

Genetics could be fantastic. Cancer could be gone within two generations. Only the rich countries will be able to afford the treatment, of course, but that's already true for a vast number of medicines. I love the idea of genetic manipulation. Mind you, the genetically-enhanced hero of my next three books is the product of blind environmental enthusiasm mated to corporate cynicism.

**MR:** And finally: Music, Art, Books, Sex, Drugs. If you had to lose one completely, which one?

**JCG:** Sex is a human necessity and I'm tempted to say the same for drugs and music. Art I love and can't imagine life without paintings. Actually, I can, because I'm sitting in a bare office having just packed all my possessions into boxes ready to move house and the room has a cold almost soulless feel without the pictures. I could cheat, I suppose, and say I could do without books because I could always write my own but the real answer is that I can't answer. They're all too inextricably linked inside my head.

## MICHEL FABER

### UNDER THE SKIN

Michel Faber

Canongate, £6.99

review & interview by David Soyka



Michel Faber's critically acclaimed *Under the Skin*, re-released as a B-format paperback in January and nominated for the Whitbread Prize for First Novel, is a metaphor for how, despite our differences, we're pretty much the same, although that sameness includes predilections for unthinking cruelty. While that realization won't put an end to needless suffering, the inherent beauty of existence provides hope that sentient beings may transcend their beastly inclinations. It might also make you reconsider your eating habits.

While Faber isn't a vegetarian, and his book isn't a simplistic polemic about the mistreatment of animals, *Under the Skin* is concerned with food chain ethics. "Human beings are by nature omnivores. Some people deny this biological fact, claiming that all our ills stem from eating meat. This is nonsense. Some people, however, make a purely moral decision not to eat other animals, a choice I respect enormously. Western culture's consumption of meat has reached





such a pitch of gluttony that it now involves terrible cruelty to animals and alarming scientific abuses. The weird things we do in order to produce an endless supply of supermarket steak no longer bears much relation to farming as we like to imagine it. It has entered the realm of sci-fi horror.”

Indeed, that very realm could describe a novel featuring an otherworldly character on the prowl for male hitchhikers in the Scottish Highlands. But the enthusiastic reviews of the American publication by Harcourt Brace of *Under the Skin* (*The New York Times*, for example, calls it ‘remarkable... a strange, sometimes crude meditation on mercy, pain and iniquity’) prefer ‘fable’ and ‘grotesque’ over ‘science fiction’ or ‘fantasy’. Which suits Faber just fine.

“I would never have signed a contract with a publisher that contemplated marketing *Under the Skin* as sf,” he says. “No amount of money is worth what that label inflicts on the work of a serious writer who wants to be free to use – or not use – sf or fantasy elements depending on the themes of each individual book. It’s not about whether you’re willing to stand up and defend sf, it’s about whether you’re willing to sit back and watch your work ending up on the bookseller shelves with the *Babylon 5* tie-ins.”

Not that Faber looks down on the genre. “Those people who think sf is some sort of inferior cousin of ‘real’ literature are snobs,” Faber says. “Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*, for example, is a damn sight more interesting than anything written by Anita Brookner. In an ideal world, booksellers would put the well-written novels, whatever their content or genre, in one part of the store and the garbage, whatever its literary pretensions, in another. But that would require the bookstore to admit that much of its stock is garbage and that most of its customers are hungry for trash – which is no way to run a business.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the author of a book that deals in themes of alienation is something of an alien himself, born in the

Netherlands, an emigrant to Australia at age seven, and now a resident of Ross-shire, Scotland. His personal diaspora also includes working at various manual labour jobs, though Faber doubts it has influenced his writing much.

“It’s the books that are important, not the people who write them. I really don’t care if Tolstoy was an aristocrat or a ditch-digger, and Dickens doesn’t rise in my estimation because he had a tough childhood. I’m not convinced my own work is any better because I once mopped stairs in an apartment block. I think Jeffrey Archer or Judith Krantz would possibly be enriched as human beings if they spent a few months working in a geriatric hospital, but I doubt it would make much difference to the quality of their prose. In any case, once I trained as a nurse, I never had to work more than two full days a week to support my writing. Shabby rented rooms were cheap in the Australian inner cities where I spent my young adulthood. I ate very little and had no bad habits except second-hand books and records. So I never felt I was slaving my life away for the sake of a few precious hours of literary freedom. It’s closer to the truth to say that up until a few years ago I could write five days a week, and now I can write seven.”

That expanded work schedule leaves little time out for reading. “While I read a lot of non-fiction for research, I get to maybe only five books a year,” he says, “one of the most recent being a volume of short stories by Ali Smith called *Other Stories* and *Other Stories*. I also has the opportunity to review Margaret Atwood’s superb *The Blind Assassin* for *The Scotsman*.” Asked what writers may have influenced him, Faber says, “I don’t emulate any writer in particular, I pick up techniques and tangential inspirations from all over the place. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, which is not even a novel but a book of art criticism, has had a big influence on my world view as I express it in my fiction. I admire Kurt Vonnegut for his moral scope and compassion. The use of allegory in medieval literature still excites me. Technically, I’ve learned a lot about the pacing of comic dialogue from a playful little pulp called *Every Crook and Nanny* by Evan Hunter. Dickens I’ve admired and studied closely. The King James Bible is part of my bones.”

Faber is also an eclectic music fan, as you might expect from a scene in which one of the hitchhikers picked up by Isserley, the strangely sympathetic alien protagonist, expounds on a John Martyn concert he’s headed to. “One of the things I enjoy about Martyn is how far he’s developed away from his earliest work. I find Kate Bush, Roy Harper and Richard Thompson interesting for the same reasons. My ideal band, in terms of scope and development, were *Psychic TV*,” he says. “I do play music when I’m writing, but it has to be mainly instrumental so I don’t get distracted from the

words in my head. Basically, I love all music that’s composed and played with passion, wit and sincerity. Which rules out everything you’re likely to find on commercial radio or MTV.”

Faber’s next book will be a novella called ‘The Hundred And Ninety Nine Steps’. “It wasn’t supposed to be, I was working on the next novel, but I was commissioned to write a short story set in Whitby and it grew to 26,000 words – long enough to stand on its own.” The novel he’s currently working on is set in 1875 London. Faber promises that it is “guaranteed alien-free.” He adds that, “When *Under the Skin* took off so remarkably, I worried that Canongate would be frustrated not being able to follow up with a comparably weird, Scottish, modern tale, so I offered to lay aside the Victorian novel and write something else. Not a retread of *Under the Skin*, but something which would at least seem to be written by the same writer! However, Canongate reassured me that they’d get behind whatever I was most committed to writing – and that the readership would either take it or reject it. A rare attitude for a publisher to have, but that’s the big advantage of signing with an independent.”

Following the new novel, Faber says he’s planning another short story collection. “I’ve got so much material, but the wheels of publication turn slow.”

## PAUL MCAULEY

### THE SECRET OF LIFE

Paul McAuley

HarperCollins, £16.99

review & interview by Andrew Hedgecock



In *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, a massively influential and deeply pessimistic lecture given at Cambridge University in 1959, CP Snow highlighted the widening gulf between the culture of scientists and that of ‘literary intellectuals’. Snow’s concern at the ruinous effect of this schism on human development is shared by the boundary-bashing, genre blending author and ontological guerrilla Robert Anton Wilson. Throughout his oeuvre Wilson has trumpeted the view that good scientists bring the visionary flair of creative artists to their chosen discipline, while good artists approach their work with all the rigour of trained scientists.

We’re living through one of those periods when rapid developments in science and technology are triggering massive changes in the ways we live and think – and these psychological, economic and social transformations are taking place in a context of powerful pressures towards commercial conformity, political expediency and lazy thinking.

So it’s a blessing that the capacity of sf to rapidly absorb and engage with the vital subject matter of the present and the near





future has been able to tempt so many scientists across Snow's cultural divide. In recent years the genre has given us storytelling scientists of the calibre of Stephen Baxter, Greg Egan, Ken MacLeod, Alison Sinclair and Paul McAuley.

Paul McAuley is the very model of a modern renaissance figure. He took a PhD in botany and has worked as a researcher in biology at Oxford University and UCLA. He also lectured in botany at St Andrews University before becoming a full time writer. Best known as a 'radical hard sf' novelist, his work has encompassed alternative history, baroque space opera, re-mixed mythology, science fantasy and the supernatural chiller. In addition to his restless experimentation with genre and storytelling technique, McAuley's work is distinguished by accomplished formal control, an abundance of challenging ideas, accomplished parody, tight plotting, convincing characterisation and a rich vein of dark humour.

McAuley's hallmarks – sense of fun, imaginative invention and gripping narrative – are all to be found in his latest novel *The Secret of Life*. Set on Earth and Mars, it's a bravura example of near future sf, underpinned by a serious concern with some of the alarming possibilities presented by the collision of business, politics and science in the contemporary world. The plot centres on the discovery of an ancient micro-organism with super-evolved DNA, the Chi, that becomes the focus of a no-hold-barred battle between biotech corporations. When, as the result of a ruthless act of industrial sabotage, the Chi ends up in the Pacific Ocean and the already dire ecological plight of the Earth takes a serious turn for the worse. Celebrated microbiologist Dr Mariella Anders realises a lifelong ambition when she joins a NASA expedition to Mars. But her struggle to understand the rapidly mutating, enormously adaptive and potentially deadly Chi is complicated by her fight to uphold the principle of humanitarian science against multinational greed, political manoeuvring and academic self-interest.

Assured, intelligent and entertaining, it's one of those novels that reminds jaded sf readers what they've always loved about the genre. And, in spite of the complexity of some of the science, it doesn't necessitate a crash course in microbiology.

So, to what extent has McAuley's work as a researcher informed his fiction and to what extent has his interest in storytelling informed his work as a botanist?

"Well, both art and science are creative endeavours, and a few hundred years ago no one would have thought that they required different intellectual approaches. And, in many ways, the apprenticeship a modern scientist serves under her PhD supervisor is similar to the relationship between an apprentice artist of the Renaissance and his master. Although the details of what's being learnt in both cases are, of course, quite different, both are concerned with investigating, apprehending and presenting the mystery of the world – and in gaining the intellectual and practical skills necessary to carry out those tasks. My training as a scientist – discovering the structure of things, how they are made and how they work – has an obvious link to writing fiction. I'm still passionately interested in science, and I think that interest informs all of my novels to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps most directly in *The Secret of Life*, which has a scientist as hero."

But it takes more than a writer's passionate interest to bring about the renaissance of a sub-genre. In recent years hard sf has attracted a throng of writers who take scientific/technological concepts in astonishing directions, populate their work with compelling characters and tackle the vital *human* issues of our era. What have been the hot issues in scientific development – social, political, financial and psychological – the genre has had to tackle? And what imminent developments ought we to be most frightened or excited about?

"There have been so many conceptual breakthroughs in science in the past twenty years that it's difficult to know which ones are the most important, but for my money the new biological revolution is the most exciting. The human genome project, cloning, the ongoing investigation into the nature of consciousness, all throw up questions about the fundamental meaning of what it is to be human, and how we define ourselves as individuals and as a species.

"What ought to worry us? Two sides of the same coin: the creeping privatisation of life, through copyright of genetic sequences by private firms, and by appropriation of useful plants grown in the Third World by giant corporations in the First World. And the rise of anti-science protests, very often fuelled by deliberate misrepresentation of what science does."

And what does McAuley see as the literary developments that drew human-centred storytellers back to a genre that appeared to be in terminal decline twenty-five years ago?

"Within the sf genre, there has been a lot

of recent reworking of the basic themes, often with an impatience towards the way in which wonderful ideas have been presented in a lame, undynamic way with one-dimensional characters. This isn't something new in sf, of course: the so-called Golden Age in the late 1940s and 50s saw a similar revising and reworking of crude pulp themes from the 30s. And there were similar revisions in the 60s, with the New Wave, and in the 80s with cyberpunk."

In *The Secret of Life* McAuley guides his readers beyond the frontiers of biotechnology without loosening his narrative grip with didactic asides. So how does he manage to combine the roles of expert scientist and literary entertainer?

"As far as I'm concerned, two things come before ideas: plot and character – and with character, the voice or tone that informs the narrative. And that, I'm beginning to think, is at least as important as plot. I have to get these things right first, and I always find that a lot harder than getting ideas. There are always plenty of ideas; it's putting them to work in a comprehensible framework that's difficult. So while there's a lot about science and scientists in *The Secret of Life*, and the plot revolves around an extrapolation based on the modern synthesis of Darwinism and the genetic code, I've tried to keep the human story as the backbone of the novel.

"And, of course, I hope I've presented what I think are important and startling ideas in an entertaining way. For instance, at one point there's a pretty large amount of material about the way in which information is encoded in DNA and how that information is spun into life. But to give it some narrative impetus I've presented it within a description of lectures given by Mariella Anders at UCLA, the circumstances in which she gave them, and her research into the origin of the genetic code. The last element is so thoroughly buried in deep time that I can get away with some wild speculation. As for comprehensibility, I do work hard at it but I have to thank my various editors who have pointed out that in earlier drafts I often didn't work hard enough."

McAuley isn't one of those scientists who portray research as a process unsullied by politics, finance, careerism and vanity – his disenchantment with academic research is evident throughout the book. But given his obvious relish for research, his decision to leave academia must have been a difficult one. What has he gained from writing full-time – and what has he sacrificed?

"I kind of burned out in academia. I was fine when I was living the hand-to-mouth life of a postdoctoral researcher, something I sustained for ten years, but then I got a job as a university lecturer, and found myself spending less and less time at the lab bench. *The Secret of Life* utilises some of those frustrations in its depiction of the culture of scientific research. Also, because of the tremendous workload of university lecturers, I had



almost no spare time for writing. So I made the selfish and irresponsible choice of becoming a full-time writer, and haven't regretted it. Now I have the time to pay attention to much more than the very narrow field in which I specialised (plant-animal symbioses), and feel very much less self-conscious about writing directly about science."

This professional disillusionment is deftly worked into the narrative and if it had appeared in a literary satire or campus novel the broadsheet critics would be queuing to slap McAuley on the back for his razor sharp critique on academic politics. So how does he feel about the fact that sf writers tackling urgent, complex and serious human issues receive limited attention outside publications dedicated to the genre?

"Actually, I've already written a campus novel (*Secret Harmonies*), but because it was set on another planet... I think every sf writer feels frustrated by consignment to the monthly round-up column, where nothing, good or bad, can be allotted more than fifty words: it's a complaint of mystery novelists, too. I'm trying to write novels that appeal to both sides of the divide, and to write them as best I can; there's a danger with all genres of writing only for the cognoscenti."

'Naming the Dead', McAuley's chilling, subtle story in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* (edited by Stephen Jones) is an interesting departure from what many see as his 'core' material. It features the eccentric psychic detective Mr Carlyle: I would have described him as a contemporary fellow traveller of William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki and Sheridan Le Fanu's Dr Hesselius – but the label contemporary doesn't quite fit...

"Mr Carlyle is a Victorian living in the present day: he is, after all, a kind of consulting detective, a very Victorian figure in genre literature. He violently disapproves of the modern world and has a rigid and unforgiving set of morals. He was an interesting exercise in finding a voice to explore some by-ways of London life – one I've returned to already, in a story published in *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories 2*, edited by the inestimable Nicholas Royle."

So is the psychogeography of London something that engages McAuley? And is the urban ghost story a form he'd like to explore in more depth?

"I don't spend as much time walking around London as I should but as a recent immigrant I'm fascinated by the layering of history that you see everywhere in London. It's a city which contains more odd and eccentric places than any I know: the shop just off Covent Garden that sells old scientific instruments; the memorials in Postman's Park; the pub off Fleet Street which is a shrine to Mr Punch; Brick Lane on Sunday... And in a place in which the sense of history is as palpable as a London Particular, ghost stories are an obvious form of narrative. The most popular London story is, after all, a ghost story: there's no getting around the fact that Jacob Marley is dead. I do have

a very vague idea for a long story, or a short novel, about London history – particularly buried or hidden London history – set in the 1840s. But beyond the title and a few scenes at the moment it's as tenuous as any will-o'-the-wisp."

McAuley has explored the possibilities of a number of sub-genres of sf, fantasy and horror in his novels and stories: does he think genre fiction will continue to provide him with the means to tackle his concerns and obsessions – or can we expect some new departures?

"I like stories, and that's what the best genre fiction is about – a strong story developed through its characters. For me, stories are central to being human. The old saw that everyone has a novel in them isn't quite right: we each have a story in us, the story of our lives – and that story is braided with past and future. Stories are inexhaustible because the same basic story can contain an infinite variety of information. You can tell the same basic story over and over (someone is dead – why?) and never reach the end of its permutations. The novel I've just finished, *Whole Wide World*, begins with that basic question. It's a very near future thriller about information, access to information, and surveillance, with the form of a police procedure.

## NOVELS

### VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE

Paulo Coelho

HarperCollins, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Veronika, a young Slovenian woman, who in her own mind at least has everything to live for, decides to kill herself rather than hang around waiting for it all to slip away. She takes an overdose, but is revived in Villete asylum, where the doctors inform her that she has damaged her heart and has only a week or so to live. Under sentence of death Veronika is led to reassess her options, to reflect on the life she so nearly threw away and recognise its worth. At the same time she acts as a catalyst to precipitate change in others, her presence in the asylum having an effect on the inmates, many of whom are cured but have become institutionalised.

Coelho is currently the best-selling writer in the world after John Grisham, and it's easy to see why. This slim volume I suspect contains more of lasting value than can be found in Grisham's entire oeuvre. Using Veronika as his point of departure, through several interlocking stories Coelho presents an oblique approach to madness, asking exactly what it is and why we should fear it, and by inference illuminates the thorny problem of life itself. A Brazilian, Coelho's work is rooted firmly in Western literary tradition. Ideologically Veronika brings to

dural. It's something I haven't tried before, and I think it relies as much upon the voice of the narrator as the ideas. I'm getting very obsessed with voice, and narrative form."

I ended my conversation with Paul McAuley on one of his favourite themes: the location that has provided such a resonant symbol for him, many of his contemporaries and several earlier generations in sf. Just what is it about Mars that makes it such an enduring feature of visionary fiction?

"It's the planet that is most like Earth. The American astronomer Percival Lowell mapped vast, ancient, and water-hungry empires across it. And early in the last century HG Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs expanded Lowell's ideas into classic science fictional and fantasy stories. Mariner and Viking, the Mars Pathfinder and the Mars Global Surveyor have made it the planet whose surface we know most about. It's a place with its own rules of form, a place with a history quite different from Earth's, a grand and empty stage set waiting for the first human dramas. It isn't a question of will we go to Mars, it's *when* will we go? In *The Secret of Life*, I optimistically set the first manned landing about twenty years in the future, but I'd be deeply disappointed if I had to wait as long as fifty years."

mind the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, while its plot owes much to Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but Coelho appeals more directly to the emotions than either. The author he most resembles is Vonnegut. There is the same lightness of touch about the prose, the same compassionate perspective, the same overlap of the author's life with his fiction, the same sense of spirituality minus a smug religiosity. Beautifully written and packed with insight, *Veronika Decides to Die* is a book that is wholly and unconditionally life affirming, inviting the reader to take a leap of faith, to live on one's own terms rather than those of others. Buy it, if for no better reason than to knock Grisham off the top spot.

### HAMMERHEAD RANCH MOTEL

Tim Dorsey

HarperCollins, £6.99

reviewed by Andrew Hook



Reading *Hammerhead Ranch Motel* is a similar experience to watching twenty television channels simultaneously. Comparable with much of today's popular culture it steals from the past, and spins, tweaks and bastardises its content to create a product both familiar yet different. Therefore elements of noir, black comedy, crime capers, thrillers, and pulp fiction run riot through the text at breakneck speed, revealing a controlled mishmash of plot which will undoubtedly appeal to the highest possible



genre/trash audience.

Not that this is necessarily a bad thing. However, the first fifty pages cram together so many characters and plot strands that the impression is only someone with a three second attention span could be satisfied (about the duration of the one-liner jokes which spill from the pages). Anyone wanting to keep track of the plot will find it nigh impossible. To paraphrase one of the scenarios in the book, reading it is similar to being a passenger in a car race who is handcuffed through the window to the passenger in the car being raced. There's only so much speed one can take.

The story revolves around \$5 million dollars hidden in the trunk of a car driven by its unsuspecting occupants. On the trail of the money is Serge Storms, an opportunist, schizophrenic psychopath with a likeable sense of humour and a predilection for reciting chunks of obscure Florida history, who despatches his opponents with an ingenuity deserving of The Hooded Claw from *The Perils of Penelope Pitstop*. In one scene Serge ties someone to the two opening sections of a soon to be raised bascule bridge, in another he inserts a severed head into the maw of a stuffed hammerhead shark.

Amidst murder, mayhem and the weather, Serge is the unstable lynchpin of a motley set of characters including small fry crooks, egotistical TV presenters, a smattering of hot chicks, and other sundry lowlife; with the delightful addition of a Hemingway impersonator who carries a 'Berlitz pocket reference book: *English-Hemingway/Hemingway-English*' around with him.

The novel resounds and rebounds with movie trivia, and the grand finale set during the motel's bar during a hurricane culminates with various characters alternately turning up the sound on a *Key Largo* video, causing the film's dialogue to interact both preposterously and amusingly with the text of the book.

Comparisons in style, subject matter and location with Carl Hiaason are inevitable. And some of the book's more luridly funny violent moments would not be out of place in a Tom Sharpe novel of the early 70s (albeit relocated to sunnier climes). What Dorsey can undoubtedly do however, despite some stolen originality, is entertain. *Hammerhead Ranch Motel* may not remain in your memory, but as a comic expose of the underbelly of America it is the ideal in-flight read for your next trip to Disneyland.

#### **MALARIA**

**Susan Hillmore**

Jonathan Cape, £10

**reviewed by Peter Tennant**

Zoologist and TV personality Sir Alexander Haye comes to the former island paradise of Mannar, now ruled by a corrupt government and torn apart by warring factions. He acquires an elephant for London Zoo, a gift from the island's PR conscious Presi-

dent, but off-loads onto twin brother Max, an island resident, the task of transporting it from Mannar's hinterland to the airport. Max reluctantly agrees, but contracts malaria while completing the job and returns home to die. Meanwhile the disintegration of the island's infrastructure continues and Alexander comes back to find not only his brother dead, but Mannar on the brink of collapse and the elephant herd killed by poachers.

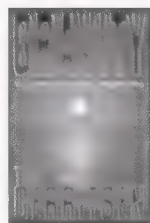
This is a short novel, but it lands a solid punch. Max's illness, which leads to fever, hallucination and ultimately suicide, stands as a metaphor for the spiritual malaise that plunges Mannar's people into self-destruction, while Alexander represents Western indifference, the eye forever turned to the main chance and away from any unpleasantness. The writing is vivid and assured, deftly interweaving images of great beauty and fecundity with those of death and decay, giving it all a kind of telephoto news immediacy, so that you feel as if you are right there alongside the characters as they confront scenes of carnage then scramble to safety while the house of cards tumbles down all around them. Pictures stay in the mind once the book is finished, snapshots of the bodies of slaughtered elephants and children butchered at an orphanage. Hillmore has no answer to the book's essential question of how we can rescue others when we seem incapable of saving ourselves, but she identifies the problem with authority.

#### **GRAVITY**

**Tess Gerritsen**

HarperCollins, £6.99

**reviewed by Antony Mann**



Some warnings: firstly, this book is peopled with heroes and heroines. They're astronauts, mostly American. Their stuff is so right it needs a good belting. They go up into orbit, their space station is infected with a green-blue nasty of the extraterrestrial exploding goo variety, most of them die horribly, some live. Down at Mission Control, the rest of the heroes remain stoic, yet determined, dignified and cool under pressure. It's a yawn.

Be also warned that this book is littered with characters thinking thoughts like 'Come on, Debbie. Fight, damn it. Don't give up on us. Don't give up on Bill' and 'No, I won't let you die. Goddammit, Emma, you are not going to leave me'. Be warned too that this book has been well researched, that no detail of medical or astronautical procedure has been omitted, no matter how dry or turgid. If you read this book, you'll come away with a good idea of how to drill into a skull to relieve the pressure on the brain due to alien slime infestation. And that's pretty much all I took away from it.

Why is this book so devoid of virtue? Because it reads like bad TV. It's predictable from page one. There's no tension. It's

weighed down by a thousand dog-tired clichés of American achievement and heroism. Even the President gets to make a little speech about how he cried when they launched John Glenn on the shuttle (p226).

Inside the front cover *Entertainment Weekly* opines 'Gerritsen treats us to some of the best medical gore and speculation about extraterrestrial life found anywhere outside *The X-Files*'. Meanwhile, the *New York Post* reckons that *Gravity* 'combines the tension of *ER* and *Apollo 13*'.

I guess I must be one of the people who'd rather watch television than read it. Personally, I was rooting for the slime.

#### **SILVERHEART**

**Michael Moorcock & Storm Constantine**

Earthlight, £10

**reviewed by Tim Lees**

*Silverheart*, according to the publisher, is based on a Moorcock novella, though fans will know it as the book of the computer game he helped devise.

Karadur is an ancient, Gormenghastly city, ringed by ice and rich with secrets. Ruled now by the Metal Clans, its rational, steam-driven surface hides an underworld of woodlands, dryad folk, and magic. To survive, the two must become integrated (a nod to Jungian psychology which adds a teasing hint of allegory to the whole scenario). Yet the Metal Clans refuse to recognise the world beneath. Salvation rests with arch-thief Max Silverskin, forced to seek out four magical artefacts which will save the city, his mentor, and, indeed, himself... If this sounds like the plot of every second game you come across, it's also one that Moorcock's used since *Stormbringer*, and has a pedigree that goes back long before that.

So far so good. The city is powerfully imagined, filled with telling details – even to pink-dyed beer drunk at the Festival of the Ruby Moon – and the image of Lord Iron presiding over all with his great camera obscura has immense appeal, the modern passion for surveillance cast in antique form. There's plenty of potential here, but then... something goes wrong.

Parts of the book just fail to come alive. In Chapter Two, for instance, there's a council of the Metal Clans. Each character is carefully described in terms of looks and personality, each acts and reacts to the world around; but it's as if we're given the ingredients for a recipe, only to find they're neither mixed nor cooked. These people talk in a generic 'lordly' speech devoid of individuality or any quirk that might help make them real for us. What's more, ruthless intriguers though they're all supposed to be, they state their views with a directness seldom heard in Westminster. It just doesn't ring true. (Contrast, a few chapters on, the vanity of Captain Coffin, brought vividly to life by simply having him dress before a mirror. It's witty, engaging and authentic. Why not more of this?) Again, when Max's mission is explained to him, it feels as if



we're reading from the game manual. And there's a definite impatience with the game itself. Guardian monsters are produced and then dispatched in a perfunctory manner, and when characters profess their incredulity at what befalls them, you suspect it's one or other author crying out for help.

None of this would matter if there weren't so many signs of something much, much better struggling to break through. The relationship between Max and Rose develops with a charming subtlety, and indeed, Rose herself is more credible here than in some of Moorcock's solo efforts, where she sometimes seems a combination of political ideal and wish-fulfillment. Max, too, is interesting enough, a vulnerable hero, though we see little of the trickster he's originally billed as (I'd pictured him as someone from an old Burt Lancaster film). Pleasant escapism, and I wouldn't want to put off anybody reading it for that. Sadly though, in this instance the union of two major fantasists proves less than the sum of its parts.

## THE NUDIST COLONY

**Sarah May**

Vintage, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Fourteen-year-old Aesop is knocked down one evening by Ludwig James's chauffeur driven car, and on a whim the older man adopts him as a kind of mascot. Ludwig has connections with organised crime. In the

past he was the lieutenant of eccentric billionaire Mack, overlord of a Brazilian empire, but Ludwig's stay in the jungle left him with borealis, a rare skin disease that requires constant treatment. When the past catches up with Ludwig it's Aesop who's left to take the fall.

Sarah May's debut novel is great fun, a narrative packed with oddball characters and crazy dialogue, like a Marx Brothers movie given a surrealist twist. The pace is frantic, while May's observations about people and society are a source of constant delight, pithily expressed and neatly slotted into a story fuelled by a manic energy and drawing on seemingly bottomless depths of wit. If I have a complaint it's that ultimately the components of the plot don't interlock as neatly as they should. At the end there are too many loose strings left dangling, too many questions still begging answer, as if the author got swept away on the tide of her own cleverness and was having such a good time she forgot to give it a cohesive structure. A journey to be enjoyed for the scenery en route rather than the eventual destination.

## SUPER-CANNES

**JG Ballard**

Flamingo, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

For nearly three decades, in books such as

*High-Rise* and *Running Wild*, Ballard has been presenting readers with outwardly idyllic social units and then revealing the foundations of clay on which they are built. *Super-Cannes*, the latest in this dystopian sub-genre, takes the idea of crime as recreational therapy from *Cocaine Nights* and develops it on a larger and more systematic basis.

Situated on the French Riviera, just above Cannes, Eden-Olympia is riding the wave of the future, a hi-tech business park in which many of the world's largest multinationals have a stake, a closed community of movers and shakers whose motto is 'work is pleasure'. Dr Jane Sinclair is recruited to work in Eden-Olympia's clinic, a replacement for David Greenwood, a young and idealistic medic who ran amok with a gun and killed ten people before being gunned down himself, and nobody knows the reason why. Jane's spare wheel husband Paul, a pilot grounded by injury, sets out to learn what really happened, egged on by Eden-Olympia's presiding spirit, the psychiatrist Wilder Penrose. He discovers that beneath the respectable and businesslike veneer a very different culture has evolved, offering a way for bored executives to release their workaday neuroses through acts of criminality, but the revelation presents Sinclair with a dilemma in that he is himself strongly attracted to this alternative lifestyle, a voyeur who protests at what he sees but cannot bring himself to look away.

This is a double layered book, both mystery story and study of psychopathology. As a mystery it works well, presenting a traumatic event filtered through the perceptions of various eye witnesses, and allowing Paul to patiently slot together the pieces of the puzzle, albeit the final design won't be a big surprise to anyone familiar with Ballard's work (my biggest reservation about the book is that it's a little too similar to *Cocaine Nights*), but it's the psychology that gives the story backbone and makes it relevant. Eden-Olympia is Plato's Republic, but with psychologists in charge rather than philosophers, and using the community as a laboratory for experiments in human behaviour. Wilder Penrose is mad, but like other Ballardian visionaries such as Vaughan from *Crash* there is a method to his madness, a twisted logic that casts him in the role of tempter and apologist for all that is worst in human nature. While the overall picture doesn't quite ring true – Eden-Olympia seems a possible future rather than a probable one – much of the detail has the disturbing ring of familiarity. Ballard's genius is to put his finger on present cultural trends (the work ethic of big companies, the new meritocracy, paintball battles as exercises in team building etc) and then, Cassandralike, take them that one step further to sound a note of warning. He may not be right in his predictions, but it would be a pity if we turned a deaf ear, particularly when they are so eloquently spoken.

## CRESCENT CITY RHAPSODY

**Kathleen Ann Goonan**

Millennium, £6.99

reviewed by Mike Thomas



A whopping great slab of ultra high-tech hard sf, and a bloody good read to boot. This is a page-turner, with more characters than *War and Peace* and more bizarre visions of the future than Mystic Meg on acid. But

hang on to your hat, it takes some mental effort to keep up with the varied cast and complex events, as the action spans the years 2012–39 in truly epic style.

In New Orleans, 2012 AD, mob boss and visionary Marie Laveau is murdered. Meanwhile, in Virginia, a brilliant radio astronomer gathers data on a weird electromagnetic pulse in Earth's atmosphere which has broken down all radio and television communication, as well as the internet. As global chaos threatens, newly perfected nanotechnology is employed both by forces of good and of destruction, to radically alter the shape of human culture. And that's just for starters.

Although the novel is set in a fashionably dystopian future, Goonan offers a hopeful and at times intentionally funny take on the cyberpunk/nano-technology genres. The savage interplay of multinational corporate greed and nano-terrorism (nanoviruses that reprogram the mind, and can turn whole populations into compliant zombies) is tempered by skilful characterisation and a belief in humanity's ability to triumph over adversity.

Goonan's style is slightly self indulgent and far from concise. In effect, she throws a plateful of intellectual spaghetti at the wall, and sees what sticks. Fortunately, there are underlying structures within the novel which prevent it collapsing under its own weight. Goonan uses the form of music as a template for her novel, as she has with previous works (*Queen City Jazz* and *Mississippi Blues*). Therefore it is not surprising that the chapter titles consist of phrases such as 'Major tonal change' and 'Extended riff in past and future minor'.

The result is deliberately confusing, sometimes pretentious, but always interesting and occasionally mind-blowing. This is a challenging read, which demands thoughtful contemplation from the reader. The pay-off is a convincing glimpse into not only the technological advances of the near-ish future, but also the way in which humans will perceive and adapt to these changes. Ultimately, it is Goonan's deep insight into the way human inventions shape human consciousness that led me to find this a most enjoyable book.

## CELTIKA

**Robert Holdstock**

Earthlight, £12.99

reviewed by Sarah Singleton

Fans of Robert Holdstock's tales of dank woodlands, leaf litter and ancient magic will



not be disappointed by the latest chronicle of myth and dark history, *Celtika*, subtitled 'Book One of the Merlin Codex'. Centred on the eternal wandering of the centuries old, eternally young Merlin, the novel draws on the mythology of Greece, the Finnish Kalevala, Arthuriana and the Celts. The action begins with a screaming ship buried beneath a frozen lake. We follow Jason the Argonaut as he wakes from a slumber of centuries to search for his two sons, stolen by his wife Medea when he feared they were dead. The plot rambles from scene to disparate scene, and the cast is huge. Incidents refer back to the distant past, and forward with names and stories we anticipate in the future. Merlin's first person narration is the single thread holding the account together. Certainly the novel feels like one small part of a larger whole, threads dangling, with an afterword directing us to the continuation of 'the first extended narrative text' in the next volume of the Merlin Codex. The novel is beautifully written, the language itself containing echoes of early English poems in style and rhythm – of a brutal hand to hand battle, for example, he writes: 'Red-flushed, foam-mouthed, their voices like high-pitched, one-note horns.'

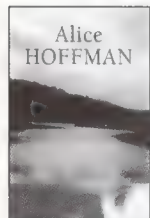
The mixing of storytelling traditions seems odd at first, but the characterisation works well, and Holdstock has not lost his unerring ability to stir the spirit, and summon the echoes of forgotten histories.

### THE RIVER KING

**Alice Hoffman**

Chatto & Windus, £15.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



The small Massachusetts town of Haddan is home to the exclusive and prestigious Haddan School. Town and School exist in a form of symbiosis, the former's population resentful of but financially dependent on the latter. August Pierce, a scholarship student, is unsuited to life among the School's spoiled rich kids. He wants no part of its secret brotherhood with their barbaric hazing rituals. When Pierce drowns in mysterious circumstances it's convenient for the authorities to write him off as a suicide; scandals at the School are always hushed up in this way, the Town's co-operation being rewarded each time with the endowment of some new public amenity. Only on this occasion there are people determined to drag the truth out into the open and shatter the illusions that sustain Haddan's status quo, no matter the cost to themselves or others.

This is a ghost story, though the actual presence of any spirits per se remains open to question, as such things do in real life. Each of the main characters is haunted; student Carlin Leander by Gus Pierce, the friend she drove away, teacher Helen Davis by the memory of a past romance, police officer Abel Grey by guilt over the suicide of his

teenage brother, and Betsy Chase is haunted by Grey himself, the man she loves but knows she mustn't have. Slowly the past invades the present, until the only way these driven people can find redemption is through some dramatic gesture, a break with all that has gone before.

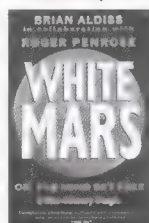
This is the first book I've read by Hoffman, but barring death and taxes it won't be the last. She writes like a recording angel, adroitly stage managing a large cast of characters, giving the reader full measure of sadness and joy, evoking small town America with such a strong sense of place you can see the chintz curtains moving, and she makes it all seem so easy. *Twin Peaks*, but this time done with feeling.

### WHITE MARS

**Brian Aldiss & Roger Penrose**

Warner Books, £7.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Any Mars book invites comparison with Kim Stanley Robinson's epic trilogy, and this one throws down the gauntlet more deliberately than most, with a proposal in direct opposition to Robinson's programme of terraforming.

A global economic collapse leaves six thousand people stranded on Mars where, under the leadership of Tom Jefferies, they set about laying down firm principles for a utopian community and preserving the planet as a base for scientific research. There's a unique alien life form and some 'big' science to keep the fans happy, but basically these are sideshows. The real thrust of the narrative is shown by the book's alternative title, 'The Mind Set Free – A 21st-Century Utopia'.

Of the two alternating viewpoint characters, we know Tom Jefferies is a charismatic leader because all the other characters keep telling us so, but there's little evidence he could inspire the proverbial piss up in a brewery. Certainly he seems lacking in basic understanding of human nature, as when, after his stepdaughter Cang Hai has narrowly avoided rape for the second time, Tom decides that she needs 'indoctrination into the pleasures of sex' and turns up uninvited in her sleeping quarters to put matters right, only to come away puzzled at being rebuffed (women, eh?). Cang Hai, the other viewpoint character, serves little purpose except as a sounding board for her betters, and sometime incitement to rape. She's supposed to be from China, but all her cultural references are western, and her desiderata for her daughter is that she has 'a contract-husband to protect her' (gender politics in this utopia have taken a backward step). The writing is flat when it's not simply embarrassing and the dialogue is strained, with all the characters willing to drop into lecture mode at the slightest provocation. There is no serious opposition to the views put forward, just a handful of straw men

in masks who threaten to be nasty to Cang Hai if they don't get their own way, and the ending, with everyone back on Earth applauding the 'Martians' and big corporations writing off the billions they've invested in getting to Mars, reads like wish fulfilment, pure and simple. While much of the book is special pleading for Mars the planet itself remains an abstract concept. There's none of the grandeur and beauty you get from Robinson's books; having travelled millions of miles across space these people are content to sit in their airtight domes and debate what's to be done with Mars instead of getting out there and actually experiencing it.

The problem with *White Mars* is that it's a book with an agenda, that of the Association for the Protection and Integrity of an Unspoiled Mars, of which Aldiss is the President, and the agenda gets in the way of the story. As a collection of theories, critiques and observations about Earth society, many of them prescriptive, it's a thought provoking document, a sugar coated pill of a book, but as a novel *White Mars* is unsatisfactory on almost every level.

### THE BEACH ROAD

**Sarah Diamond**

Orion, £9.99

reviewed by Mike Thomas



This is the tale of two troubled teenagers: Beverley, a poor little rich girl with a dark secret and Jane, an abuse victim who has more than one screw loose. The pair find solace in each other's company in small town coastal Dorset, where the cold waters of the English Channel echo the cultural bleakness of Diamond's fictional Underlyme. The main plot tension derives from the fact that Beverley is gradually coming to terms with her problems, while Jane is almost visibly falling apart at the seams. And the reader soon becomes aware that something very unpleasant is going to occur as a result.

*The Beach Road* is an interesting first novel by twenty-four-year-old author Sarah Diamond, written in a direct and deceptively simple style. The majority of characters in the book are female teenagers, and Diamond peppers their dialogue with references to 'wicked' CDs and 'cool' boys. The young female context of the novel is an interesting spin on familiar horror/crime plotlines, and the contemporary youth setting adds a touch of grimy realism.

The background to the main story is well realised, and the motivation behind the violence is convincing and satisfyingly twisted. Diamond presents suburban teenagers as they really are, shallow, self-obsessed and desperate for some kind of identity.

Most of the novel is given over to the thoughts and actions of the beautiful and well-heeled Beverley and her new friend Jane, who has arrived from London bearing physical and mental scars. While both char-



acters are well realised, it is Jane who lingers in the memory as a brooding nut case of the first order (you really wouldn't want to meet this girl in a dark alley, especially when she is accompanied by her favourite kitchen knife). It is a mark of Diamond's skill, then, that the reader is left feeling a measure of sympathy even for this violent character.

Reading *The Beach Road* won't change your life, there are no great shocks or surprises. On the plus side I found the narrative style gripping enough to keep me turning the pages, and the book has a certain quirky originality.

## THE RESURRECTION CLUB

**Christopher Wallace**

Flamingo, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



There are two strands to Christopher Wallace's second novel. One is set in Edinburgh in 1829, at the height of the grave robbing frenzy, and concerns the activities of Dr Alexander Brodie, a genius who believes he has invented a device to trap the human soul, but Brodie's experiments lead him into dubious areas of medical ethics. The second strand brings us forward to 1999 where Brodie's device, mistaken for a sex toy, has turned up at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the hands of Peter Dexter, a performance artist with an unwholesome agenda of his own.

Wallace's invention is impressive, telling the story through the medium of first and third person accounts, legal documents, PR handouts, interviews with eye witnesses etc, the whole gelling to create a disturbing picture of some cold, manipulative force at work, and the counter measures instigated by a mysterious agency charged with neutralising its actions. Edinburgh, past and present, is brought to vivid life, while the exploration of medicine's murky past cleverly highlights ethical dilemmas confronting science in the present day. Wallace is perhaps at his best though when dealing with the strange symbiosis between modern art and PR hype, the emphasis on spectacle in both and their common aim of manipulating audience expectations. A witty and intelligent novel by a writer who bears watching.

## BOOK OF PAGES

**David Whiteland**

Ringpull, £9.99

reviewed by Trevor Mendham

This book operates on so many different levels that summarising it is difficult. So let's start with the bare facts: it consists of sixty-odd large pages. Each is printed on one side only and labelled 'Flight', 'The Villain', 'Security', etc. Most consist of a line drawing taking up around half of the page, along with a few hundred words of text. The text and pictures tell the story of Jiniki, a monk sent from his monastery to a near-future dysto-

pian Metropolis on a quest to retrieve a book.

Clearly it is a cross between a graphic novel and a more traditional narrative. It is also a social commentary, with most of the pages making a cynical statement about the nature and direction of society. Then there's the philosophy of simplicity to counter the materialism and complexity of the Metropolis.

Perhaps of most interest, the whole thing is one great experimental game. Whiteland clearly loves numbers and there are numerous mathematical references and jokes. In addition the book is highly self-referential, even down to the title. The book for which Jiniki is searching is of course the *Book of Pages* itself... which Jiniki is creating by his search. There are also internal jokes such as page 29 being missing – stolen by The Villain. And all the illustrations contain numbers that refer to related pages. A sort of hypertext buried within the linear framework.

So there are many levels – perhaps *too* many. Whiteland appears to have stretched himself too thin. The press release accompanying the review copy refers to delays due to last minute changes; perhaps this is significant. The graphics are good yet not inspiring enough to use as posters (presumably the idea behind one sided printing). The social commentary generates a wry smile but neither significant insights nor belly laughs. The self-reference promises much but delivers little – I was hoping that by reading pages non-sequentially it would be possible to generate an entirely new story.

Ultimately this book doesn't quite work. Whiteland is to be praised for trying such a brave experiment, unfortunately it's difficult to recommend the result.

## MERRICK

**Anne Rice**

Chatto & Windus, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Set in New Orleans, *Merrick* deepens the connections between Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and her tales of the Mayfair Witches. David Talbot, once an important member of the Talamasca, an organisation dedicated to keeping track of supernatural occurrences, and now a powerful vampire, is concerned for his friend Louis, still haunted by the death of child vampire Claudia. He contacts his old lover Merrick Mayfair, a Talamasca member and witch of great ability, to raise the spirit of Claudia and put Louis's mind at rest, but Merrick has plans of her own.

This is the first novel I've read by Rice since *Interview* and it came as a pleasant surprise. After a slow start the book gains pace and soon becomes compelling as Merrick's back story is filled in, her whole fascinating history, conjuring up visions of some other reality, a world steeped in magic and mystery just one step beyond the ordinary, everyday streets of our own. The magic scenes are some of the best I've read, con-

vincing in their detail and vividly realised on the page, while the larger than life characters strike mythic resonances. For all that though there's a marking time feel to the book, the sense that this is just a curtain raiser for some grand conflict to come, strongly hinted at in the final pages.

## ATOM

**Steve Aylett**

Weidenfeld, £9.99

reviewed by Tim Lees



Bar a couple of short stories, this was my first encounter with the Cult of Aylett. It won't be my last. The publisher's blurb abounds with comparisons – Dick, Runyon, Burroughs – and to add another, this is *Krazy Kat*

*Does Cyberpunk*: the same absurdity and sky-high violence, the same peculiarly plausible relations between creatures of distinct implausibility. Evelyn Waugh remarked that he admired PG Wodehouse for being able to fit three jokes on a page; Aylett can fit three jokes in a paragraph. It's true that some are of an irritating cuteness ('he lives in Brighton with his skeleton' says the author's bio), but at that rate it's ungrateful to complain. Besides, once immersed in the novel, the profusion of one liners becomes itself a key to Aylett's world and to the mind-set of its denizens. Here, in this overcrowded urban hive, people struggle simply to be noticed, their punchlines as important as their punches. So a barman makes a quip and bows for the applause. An execution is postponed when the attorney demands more publicity. A nightclub *chanteuse* undergoes cosmetic surgery with horribly ironic consequences: 'her body was so media-aligned it barely registered on the retina'. These people are performing constantly, begging for status and attention in a world so busy it becomes anonymous. I recognise this world. Probably you do too.

Other writers have used similarly hyperactive prose styles, but in *Atom*, what could have been mere ostentation is placed firmly at the service of the plot. There's a story here and it's a page-turner – whatever it's about. (Um, well, OK, Taffy Atom is a private eye who lives in Beerlight, which is not the sort of town you'd go to for a holiday. He's looking for Franz Kafka's brain... I think.) More important, Aylett understands exactly what he's parodying. Not cyberpunk, which was always pretty hand-me-down in terms of narrative techniques, but the original hardboiled yarns of Hammet, Chandler and the like. When Aylett skewers a cliché he does so with a thorough understanding of the form's conventions. He knows why they developed and the purposes they serve in storytelling. This isn't ridicule; it's taking an existing form and pushing it into a new dimension. Required to third degree the nightclub *chanteuse*, Atom breaks into her act and grills her right before her audience.



He then upstages her. The bad guys kidnap his fish (yes, fish). The fish prefers the bad guys' place (they have a swimming pool). *Et cetera*. It may not be profound, it may not change your life – or then again, it may. Fun it definitely is.

## COSMONAUT KEEP

Ken Macleod

Orbit, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Macleod's latest novel takes place in a universe where the Russians have conquered Europe and an uneasy truce exists with the USA. Everything is thrown into the melting pot when the Soviets announce that scientists at a base in the asteroids have made contact with aliens. Technological advances beckon, and it's not clear who will benefit from these, especially when the scientists turn against their political masters. Neatly meshing with this plot strand is a story set on a planet thousands of light years from Earth, where the human survivors of a starship landing try to recover lost technology and take their rightful place in a universe teeming with diverse alien life forms.

This is billed as 'Book One of The Engines of Light' and it shows, with much of the plot only sketched in and more questions asked than get answered. Macleod does enough work to make for a rewarding read though. Much of the book's appeal lies in its fascinating setting. On the one hand a socialist Earth, with both sides of the ideo-

logical coin shown in a novel distinguished by its political nous, par for the course with this writer. On the other we have a vast universe with gods, krakens, saurians and humans living in a harmony of sorts, plus a tantalising hint of a solution to the mystery of the Lost Colony of Roanoke. It's too early to guess where Macleod is going with this or to assess its value, but certainly he provides the reader with incentive to find out.

## MR SPACEMAN

Robert Olen Butler

Secker & Warburg, £10

reviewed by Simon Ings



Look, this is going to sound terribly twee, but ride with it. Aliens have been Watching Us – but their job is done now, and all but one of them has gone home.

On board the last brushed-chrome UFO sits Desi the alien. Desi, our present-tense narrator, is under orders to put the final touch to the alien's project. On the night of 31st December 1999, at the point of Millennium, he is to reveal himself to humankind, proving beyond all doubt that we are, after all, Not Alone.

In the last few hours of 1999, Desi makes a last-minute bid to fully understand us, this strange species upon whose tender mercies he is about to throw himself. He begins by abducting a coach-full of slot-machine hopefuls on their way to 'the Sportsman's Paradise of Louisiana...the place where they Let the Good Times Roll'.

But the more Desi 'sings' with them (Butler's metaphor for telepathy) the more disconcerted he becomes. Humans have no natural telepathic ability. Without it, they must rely on words, and words are poor substitutes for thoughts: 'The words yearn to reach out directly to this or that soul but in the process of coming into being, they take on the finite properties that make them what they are...'

The consequence of this slip 'twixt cup and lip, Desi discovers, is yearning. Every human being labours under a nigh-on unsupportable weight of hopes of dreams. How then, can Desi (who is, incidentally, regularly mistaken for Christ) fulfil his mission, 'and in doing so not create such confusion as to cast a whole world down'?

None of which really conveys what a smart cookie Robert Olen Butler really is. You might think *Mr Spaceman* is some millennial confection with a scratched-off sell-by date – and if so, you'd be delighted to find that it is, in fact, a damn funny book about, among other things, the spiritual impulse, the nature of language, and the importance of praxis. (Praxis: action in the real world. No amount of recording, no amount of 'singing', captures the sensory and practical realities in which human beings and their words live and move. And it is not until Desi embroils himself on Earth – a 'five hour mission...to seek out a kind of life new to my studies, a life full of bland contentedness' – that he begins to understand humanity's true nature.

And understand it he does – attains, anyway, more than sufficient insight to carry

# THE DARK DREAMS OF DEDALUS

reviews by Sarah Singleton

Publishing house Dedalus celebrates its seventeenth birthday this year having carved out a reputation with a list of bizarre and obscure intellectual fiction of the highest calibre. The themes range widely but the Dedalus book has an atmosphere very much its own nonetheless – cultivated in the shadier regions of the mind, in the thorny forest of corrupted desires and broken dreams. *Fin-de-siècle* decadence, a morbid curiosity, religious perversion, ennui and a fabulous feast for the senses – expressed in the most eloquent, stirring prose. The list combines challenging contemporary authors like Robert Irwin and the French Sylvie Germain, with long-lost European classics.

**When the Whistle Blows** by Jack Allen (£8.99) falls into the former category. An anarchic black comedy not for the faint-hearted, the novel takes us into the chaotic world of a Bristol school where teacher Caleb Duck has a drug-fuelled vision to redeem his students. The pace is hectic, a string of adultery, substance abuse, violence and murder – salted with the mundane paraphernalia of the modern education system

– the National Curriculum, Ofsted Inspectors and departmental rivalry. It is offensive, brutal, strange and often very funny. The depraved spiral never falters. Recommended reading for anyone who misspent their youth in a comprehensive school.

**Sebastien Roch** by Octave Mirbeau (£9.99) is a perfect example of the resurrected classic. Oddly, it shares many themes with *When the Whistle Blows*. First published in France in 1890, it portrays the development of a young boy from his innocent, carefree childhood in provincial France, through a process of intellectual and moral awakening in a Jesuit College, through disillusion and corruption into a miserable adolescence. The unfolding story is compelling – Mirbeau acutely observes the boy's troubled feelings, his relationship with his proud, insensitive bourgeois father, the cultivation of friendships and alliances at the school and the development of a Jesuit teacher's infatuation with the boy. Self-interest battles with the impulse for justice, parental ambition conflicts with natural filial affection. The prose, translated by Nicoletta Simborowski, is breathtaking – des-

criptions rendered with colour and clarity, the atmosphere and landscape of 19th century France conjured up in earth and stone and smoke. The last third of the book does fall away, but it is still a powerful and harrowing story.

**Theodore** by Christopher Harris (£8.99) is another modern novel from a new writer – though the setting is historical. *Theodore* is Harris's first novel, presented as a translation of a manuscript found at Canterbury recounting the life of the Byzantine Greek Theodore, who became the Archbishop of Canterbury, sent to England to convert the Anglo-Saxons.

The narrative meanders on a long journey through Europe's seventh century and Theodore's attempts to find love and meaning in his own life. The path leads us among curious religious sects, the brutalities of war, politics and popery. A homosexual, Theodore experiences lust and love, finally finding fulfillment with Hadrian, with whom he travels to England.

While the reader might find Theodore's life a little too eventful to be convincing – he manages to be involved in some manner with a large number of significant historical events – the novel does provide a fascinating window on the period and indicates



this short novel. *Mr Spaceman* is no messy Vonnegutian smorgasbord. Every scrap of wit and erudition clicks into place as tightly as clues in a thriller, and there's enough real tension and anxiety surrounding Desi's plight to give the lie to any accusation of twopeness.

*Mr Spaceman* springs from the intellectual impulse we normally associate with sf; Butler's enthusiastic rendering of Desi's alien nature suggests an emotional affinity with some of the greats of that genre. But nothing in *Mr Spaceman* suggests that Butler has any knowledge of or interest in the canon. In one respect this is a shame: much of his natural audience will think this a twee book before they ever bend back the cover.

But given the current decadence of sf – which seems so often only to be holding a dialogue with itself – Butler's *faux-naïvete* is cause for relief and even some celebration. Butler's is a fresh voice, seeking a fresh audience. As Goddard said of cinema (and then cut his own throat, trying to put it into practice) every form needs an occasional 'return to zero'.

I'm sure Butler couldn't care two hoots about this, but he just reset science fiction's clock.

#### MARTHA PEAKE

Patrick McGrath

Viking, £12.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

McGrath's latest novel is a historical romance of sorts, though written in the way only McGrath can. Young Ambrose Tree is summoned to Drogo Hall by his uncle to hear

the story of Harry Peake and his daughter Martha. An 18th century Cornish smuggler, in a moment of drunken folly Harry caused the fire that killed his wife and brought a roof beam down on his own back. Horribly disfigured, Harry goes to London with Martha and for a number of years earns his keep as a barroom poet, and by displaying his back to the idly curious. But when he falls off the wagon Harry becomes a brute. Martha seeks help from Tree's uncle, assistant to Lord Drogo, an anatomist with a professional interest in Peake's deformity. Passage is secured for her on a ship bound for America where she has family, and a bright future beckons despite the War of Independence looming on the horizon. But her past dogs Martha, and in a final act of desperation she changes the course of history.

This book can be enjoyed simply as a historical novel, one that takes in the squalor of London slums and the libertarian fervour of a brash, young country. As such it's a compelling story, solidly put together and well told, but McGrath is also interested in examining the gap between reality and history, between what we think we know and the actuality of the thing itself. Harry, adjudged monstrous for his appearance, acts out the role others expect of him, while Martha's pointless death is turned into an act of heroic sacrifice for the sake of political expediency. And yet, good as it is, this is a slightly flawed novel. Ambrose, the unreliable narrator, and perhaps representative of the book's subtext in the way he's continually jumping to wrong conclusions about people and their motives, at times intrudes

an unwelcome element of farce. More significantly I didn't feel as sympathetic to Harry Peake as the author obviously wanted me to. The man's acts when drunk go beyond the pale and while excuses can be made for his behaviour the aura of latterday saintliness the other characters invest him with is questionable.

## SHORT STORIES

### DRIVING THE HEART

Jason Brown

Jonathan Cape, £10

reviewed by Andrew Hook



Most of the thirteen short stories in this collection are startlingly brilliant. Clear cut prose dissects characters with an immaculate precision worthy of Raymond Carver, although the comparison is a little inadequate because Brown's stories exist originally as his own.

Dealing with familiarly intense emotive themes such as aged parents, loss, the de-fragmentation of the self through substance abuse, and alienation, Brown is careful not to make us pity his characters, but instead portrays them as broken individuals without being judgmental. Their lives exist on the peripheries of a society with no happy centre – where we can identify with their hard luck stories precisely because they are closer to us than we would like to believe.

In the title story a driver delivers vital

lengthy and meticulous research. Perhaps what it does lack is a compelling narrative structure. The linear account trundles on, and in the last chapters years pass in pages, complex developments are recounted in brief paragraphs and the intensity of the personal experience is lost. But well worth a look if the Byzantine period appeals.

**The Golem** by **Gustav Meyrink** (translated by Mike Mitchell, introduction by Robert Irwin, £6.99) was first published in Germany in 1915. Set in the eerie Prague ghetto the novel revolves around the mysterious and elusive monster called the Golem, a Jewish mythic beast created of clay and animated through the machinations of a cabalist. The protagonist is an artist called Pernath, who can not remember his early life. The golem both haunts and eludes him. It appears at the window of a room with no doors, and it may have the same face as Pernath himself.

The book is profoundly unsettling, shifting from dream to wakefulness. Pernath, the amnesiac, is searching for the key to his past, looking for the door to his memories. The ghetto is a winding cityscape populated by extraordinary characters, many of which have their own secrets which Pernath attempts to untangle. The novel re-

minds of the London of Dickens's darker novels, as well as Kafka.

Meyrink himself led a very colourful life. Born in 1868, he was a banker, but later suffered a nervous breakdown and suicide attempt, studied the occult, alchemy and cabalism, fought a series of duels, and was imprisoned. *The Golem* was made into a film by Wegener in 1920, and Duvivier in 1936.

The novel is not an easy read, the plot is winding and convoluted. It is a challenge to keep track of the cast, the reader finding it hard to make headway in a confusing welter of contradictions, hidden motives, new discoveries. But it is also rewarding, the spirit of unease and oddness, the sense of haunting are perfectly convincing. You may find yourself glancing over your shoulder once or twice. Who might be standing in the room, behind your back?

**The Book of Tobias** by **Sylvie Germain** (translator Christine Donougher, £7.99) is another modern European work. The extraordinary passionate and phantasmagoric fiction of French writer Sylvie Germain draws the reader into a landscape shaped by the intense emotions of the characters, where nothing is fixed or certain, where strange and inexplicable events unfold. Germain has created her own visionary brand

of French magic realism, where family histories are played out against an extraordinary surreal, fabulously twisted background of social and cultural history. In *The Book of Tobias*, Theodore Lebon loses his wife when she returns headless from a horse ride. Her son Tobias is brought up in a house suffused with grief. Later Tobias sets off on a journey with the angel Raphael, encountering on his travels a girl called Sara, whose seven earlier suitors have all died.

In Germain's universe life is an ordeal of immense and inexplicable suffering, where characters are fired by the passions of love and anger and hatred. People are twisted and deformed by grief, or thwarted desire. The writing is dense with weighty description, the images are bizarre – beautiful and grotesque. *The Book of Tobias* does not have the grandeur of her earlier work, *The Book of Nights*. The plot is more fragmentary, the lives of the characters less convincingly entwined. But her body of work is so vivid and unique it is well worth any reader – particularly those with a penchant for Isabel Allende, Marquez et al – stepping into Germain's fictional world.

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organs between hospitals, becoming a lone, reflective link between death and life. In another story a son remembers his mother's personality before her partial senility which ensures she steadfastly refuses to agree to a biopsy without which she will die. And elsewhere patients in detoxification plan to escape from the institution which houses them, despite being fully aware that they can no longer escape from themselves.

In each of the stories Brown deftly touches on the strands of emotion which snake out of us, and treads on them both firmly and deliberately in such a way that we cannot fail to recognise the hurt which can result.

Perhaps the superlative piece here is 'Halloween', a tale ostensibly about the budding puberty of a young female tennis player out to impress the boys, which turns ever so slightly yet poignantly on an almost throwaway sentence as the girl returns from tennis practise to see someone emerging from her parents house: 'Everyone on the air base knew about these men, who occasionally came to visit the wives of pilots'. I'm not ashamed to say that the sudden, unexpected loss of her father brought me close to tears, and I found myself amazed at the depth within which Brown manages to write, and connect, and communicate.

If there is a weakness here then perhaps it is the similarity between some of the stories. In both the title story and 'The Coroner's Report', for example, the structure centres around new workers being shown the ropes by old hands. And the final three stories, which deal primarily with Vietnam themes, appear almost superfluous to this collection which on the whole has a more immediate and universal core.

As one narrator states here: 'To have forgotten and not know one has forgotten...is the happiness of an animal.' And in these stories Jason Brown ensures our base animal instincts are not forgotten, because it is the corruption of those instincts which turn us into heartfelt human beings. *Driving the Heart* does just that, and is a collection which simply cannot be ignored.

## HI BONNYBRIG & OTHER GREETINGS

Shug Hanlan

11/9, £9.99

reviewed by Neil Williamson



11/9, a new imprint from Glasgow-based publisher, NWP Ltd, has been created with a mandate to bring contemporary Scottish fiction into print. The imprint's name is derived from the date of the referendum (11th September, 1997) when the Scottish people voted for the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament and there is clearly a feeling here that Scottish writers have lately been under-represented in terms of publishing opportunities. As such a writer myself, I have to applaud this initiative.

Shug Hanlan's debut collection for 11/9

is split into two parts. The first, 'Hi Bonnybrig' (described as a novella although it is more a collection of linked stories than a cohesive narrative in its own right) centres on a semi-fictionalised version of a real town, Bonnybridge, notorious in recent years as one of Europe's leading centres of UFO sightings. The place is positively packed with unusual activities (alien abduction, FBI interrogation – including LSD-filled teeth – and an influx of celebrity visitors hoping to 'make contact', including Shirley Maclaine, Richard Gere and the Dalai Lama) but the town's inhabitants treat it all with the same wondering acceptance as the dull minutiae of the day to day. They shrug and move on to the important things in life. Nothing gets in the way of the bowling club's next game, the dating service for cleaners and security guards, or the all-important next pint of ET Shilling (sic) beer.

Absurdities aside, this collection is a tour around my neighbourhood. It is written largely in the vernacular that I hear every day on the streets, at the bus station, in the 24-hour shop across the road. The preoccupations are common to all those who live in the West of Scotland: relationships, jobs, religion, television and, of course, football. Hanlan's depictions are right on the money. His characters are sharp, his observations achingly accurate. They are also very, very funny.

The rest of the volume is comprised of short pieces unrelated to Bonnybrig. Without the continuity of the previous section these are more variable, although there are still a few stand-outs. 'The Supermodel Phone-In' and 'The Day Dennis Law Came to Read the Gas Meter' are gems.

Since some of the argot may be difficult to decipher for non-Scots, I suppose a charge of parochialism could be levelled here, but that would be missing the point entirely. 11/9 have produced an imprint with a strong identity. As a celebration of a culture it is to be applauded, and *Hi Bonnybrig and Other Greetings* is as good an example as you'll find.

## RICHARD DADD IN BEDLAM

Alan Wall

Vintage, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Alan Wall, to judge by the fifteen stories in this collection, is one of those writers who defies easy categorisation. Take the novella 'A to Z' which leads off as an example. A policeman is brought out of semi-retirement to investigate a murder, the first in a series with apocalyptic links. It's an engrossing story, erudite and compelling, but whether you list it as horror, crime or mainstream is a matter of personal bias. And, just to complicate matters, towards the end Wall reveals that the story is set in the future, a society where they do things differently.

Let's pass on the name game then and

instead look for common concerns and points of reference. There are plenty to be found.

As with 'A to Z', the Biblical is always an option. 'The Eating of the Shadow' concerns an alternative gospel, while the delightfully mocking 'The Pig Man of Gadara' tells the story of Christ's healing of the Gadarene demoniac from the point of view of the man who owned the pigs into which the unclean spirits were banished. Old age and impending death also feature prominently, most obviously in the title story and 'Rembrandt Dying', while the art world itself is another recurring concern, at its best in 'A Compass in the Dark', which illuminates artistic preoccupations in the clash of ideas between a failed traditional painter and his friend, a highly successful modernist. Unusual mind sets come to the fore in stories such as 'Logical Positivists', about a man who tries to live by Wittgenstein's principles, the chilling 'Cult' which peeps inside the head of a David Koresh type character, and 'Underneath the Smile', a wonderfully droll send up of all those self-help manuals and courses.

Wall's stories then are an eclectic bunch, wide ranging and varied, packed with novel ideas and executed with panache. What they sometimes lack in emotional depth they more than make up for with intelligence and a ready wit. Recommended.

## MINORITY REPORT/WE CAN REMEMBER IT FOR YOU WHOLESALE

Vols 4 & 5 of The Collected Short Stories, both Millennium, £7.99

Philip K Dick

reviewed by Mike O'Driscoll

How to get to know Dick? And why should you want to in the first place? You've probably heard the line about him being one of the key figures of late 20th century sf and you've seen *Bladerunner*, *Total Recall* and perhaps even *Screamers*. Chances are you might even be aware that Steven Spielberg is working on a film version of *Minority Report*, but what the hell, you tried a couple of his novels once, maybe *Dr Futurity* or *The Unteleported Man* but you found them somewhat disjointed, incoherent and lacking in resolution, perhaps not what you expect from sf or, even worse, displaying all the stylistic shortcomings and lack of formal ambition you consider characteristic of sf. Consider what Dick had to say about style: 'Open any novel at random and usually what is happening is either dull or unimportant. The only way to redeem this is through style. It is not what happened but how it is told. Pretty soon the professional novelist acquires the skill of describing everything with style and content vanishes. In a story, though, you can't get away with this' (from the 'Notes' at the end of the fifth volume). All right, as a critique of the novel form this is hardly devastating stuff, but it does offer an insight into Dick's approach to the short story form, that for a story to work it should be possible to 'capsulize what it was about'.



And indeed one can 'capsulize' each of the 43 stories collected in these last two volumes of the series, though that's not to suggest either a lack of depth or complexity for when Dick was on top of his form, no other sf writer came as close to articulating in imaginative form the fears and concerns which have preoccupied us over the last forty years.

In a world in which technologies ranging from interactive digital television to the internet are hailed as instruments for democracy and progress it's easy to overlook the manner in which such marvels can be used to curtail the freedoms we take for granted – the inexorable spread of CCTV and the current government's obsession with snooping on our electronic communications through the RIP Bill (not to mention the growing illiteracy passed off as some kind of hip shorthand with which emails are plagued). In stories such as 'Autofac', 'War Game', 'Return Match' and 'Service Call', Dick reiterates a healthy cynicism towards technology, particularly those technologies which he perceived as threatening to render human beings surplus to requirements. The protagonists of these stories are not the stereotypical heroes of sf, but vulnerable and downtrodden men (and yes, on the whole, they are all men), who struggle to find the truth behind their apparent reality. In 'Faith of Our Fathers', written for Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*, the protagonist's belief in the political and social stability of the society in which he lives is severely undermined when he discovers that the media images which support this perception are little more than a hallucination. The truth he uncovers is particularly bleak and perhaps fostered by Dick's own view of the religious experience as partly the result of some kind of mass consensual hallucination whose purpose is to protect us from the notion of a malevolent universe.

This idea of a manufactured reality is one to which Dick repeatedly returns: in 'The Mold of Yancy', which served as the basis for his novel *The Penultimate Truth*, the popular commentator Yancy spouts platitudes about tolerance and peace, while at the same time, and on a more subliminal level, fostering notions of strength and aggression. In reality, Yancy is an artificial construct programmed to be all things to all men – sort of a synthetic Tony Blair, if that's not being tautological – whose purpose is to bring about a more homogeneous and therefore more easily manipulated society. In 'The Unreconstructed M' a separate reality of 'evidence' is created in order to implicate an innocent man as a murderer. The reality which has not yet come about but which has been predicted by precogs in 'Minority Report', is used by 'precrime' police to arrest potential criminals before they commit the predicted offence. But what happens to such a prophylactic approach to crime when one of the realities predicted

by the three precogs – the minority report – contradicts the other two? How real is a future in which technological innovation is based on the imaginings of 20th century sf writers? Such a notion is explored to hilarious effect in 'Waterspider', in which time travellers from the future kidnap Poul Anderson from a 1950s sf convention, take him back to the future in order to elicit an explanation of the finer details of a faster than light drive system. The protagonist of 'Orpheus With Clay Feet' uses the services of Muse Enterprises to travel back in time in order to inspire the best known work of famous sf writer Jack Dowland, a writer regarded in the future as the equal of Heinlein or AE Van Vogt. Having returned to the future, Jesse Slade is confronted with the realisation that instead of inspiring Dowland, he has caused him to abandon fiction writing altogether and concentrate on obscure scientific treatises. The only evidence of any fiction written by Dowland is a little known sf story called 'Orpheus With Clay Feet', published under the pseudonym Philip K Dick.

What's surprising about 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale' is not so much that Verhoeven's *Total Recall* remains faithful to the spirit of Dick, but that such a complex and surreal story, one that plays metaphysical games with the concept of identity, should have attracted the attention of Hollywood as potential blockbuster material in the first place. Substitute corporate interests for the super-computer which directs all political activity in America in the story 'Stand-By' and one can spend hours pondering whether or not George W Bush has any more real power than Max Fischer, the computer's human stand-in for TV interviews.

Not that the primary concern of these stories is prediction in any shape or form, but that they continue to have a great resonance for us nearly twenty years after his death. Reading 'The Days of Perky Pat' (later expanded into the novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*) close to forty years after it was written, it's hard not to recognise – and empathise with Dick's disgust and pessimism – at the the kind of consumerism gone mad which inspires brand loyalty to the point of social ostracism if you don't 'play the game' (it's not that far a step from brand loyalty to religious belief, as evidenced by Palmer Eldritch). 'The Pre-Persons' may offend readers who take it as 'special pleading' against abortion on demand, but viewed in the light of concerns ranging from child poverty, neglect and abuse to the harvesting of foetal material for scientific research, the story carries a greater conviction.

Not all of the stories collected in these two volumes are as memorable as these, but even when Dick's attention seems to be elsewhere, the material is either so strange or so funny as to engage us in ways that few of his contemporaries could manage.

If the execution of 'The Exit Door Leads In' doesn't live up to the idea – given a world in which information transfer has reached the velocity of light, how will we distinguish between truth and bullshit? – then the idea itself is strong enough to carry the story. Again and again, in stories such as 'A Little Something For Us Tempunauts', 'I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon' or 'The Electric Ant', Dick places his protagonists in bizarre situations which test and expose their human weaknesses (in the case of the latter, a robot's human failings) in ways which leave us in no doubt as to where his sympathies lie. If he shares their vulnerability, the motivation behind the stories is never simply a lurid form of soul-searching. Rather they are prompted by a desire to have something more to say to an extra-terrestrial being 'than my next-door neighbour'.

Dick's fear was that the trappings of modernity would reduce us all to a state where all we do when we emerge from our homes is collect the mail and newspapers or drive off in our cars, and have no other outdoor habits except to mow our lawns. His stories are a revolt against a world in which, in his own words, 'I went next door one time to check into the indoor habits. They were watching TV. Could you, in writing a sf novel, postulate a culture on these premises? Surely such a society doesn't exist, except maybe in my imagination. And there isn't much imagination involved.' For once, Dick got it wrong – it does and there is. Read these stories and see for yourself.

## THE EXPLOITS OF ENGELBRECHT

Maurice Richardson

Savoy, £20

reviewed by Rhys Hughes



There must be a curse on Maurice Richardson. The curse of being ignored. It probably has something to do with the time he was invited to Aleister Crowley's house for a curry. Crowley tried to intimidate Richardson with his usual occult pantomime of weird chants, hypnotic stares and sinister chuckles, and when these didn't work he resorted to slipping a few extra spoonfuls of chili powder into his guest's meal. But that ploy failed as well. It's clear now that Crowley played his real trump after Richardson had left, casting a spell of invisibility on the man's fiction. It still smells fresh, but it can't be seen.

Since then, a few good magicians have fought back, hoping to reveal its outline by showering praise on it, in much the same way that space heroes in the pulps threw tins of cosmetic powder at undetectable monsters from Uranus. It hasn't quite worked, but maybe the praise still hasn't settled properly. After all, the area to be covered is bigger than could ever be anticipated. The shoulders of Richardson's greatest fictional character, Engelbrecht, dwarf surrealist box-



er and nemesis of clocks, are too broad for his homuncular body. Besides, the true target is his heart, which is wider and more slippery than sunken continents.

For Michael Moorcock, one of Richardson's champions, the Engelbrecht stories are an antidote to the excesses of Epic Fantasy. For JG Ballard, they are just unmissable. They were collected all together in a book back in 1950. The publisher was Phoenix House and the package was made more alluring by the superb illustrations of James Boswell. Perfect enough in itself, and yet this overdue reprint by Savoy contrives to be even better. It contains not only Boswell's work but additional drawings by a variety of other artists connected with the Engelbrecht mythos, Gerard Hoffnung and Ronald Searle among them. The adventures of the dwarf, his chums and enemies, grow increasingly abstract and yet remain intensely visual.

The tales themselves are wild, wise and funny. Engelbrecht belongs to a remarkable organisation, the Surrealist Sportsman's Club. There are many noteworthy members, but none can match his pluck or tenacity. The SSC is responsible for inventing perilous games, all of which are absurd, none of which can be spoiled by cheating, which is slyly permitted.

The chief of this realm, the Old Id, is one of the most disturbing creations in fiction. He's unpredictable, powerful and nasty. He plays chess with nuclear bombs for pieces, shoots witches on the wing and hunts down men and politicians with hounds and ghouls. Satirical but oddly sentimental, he probably looks like Alfred Hitchcock. His favourite protégé isn't Engelbrecht but the spirit of the game, any game, provided it features a strange doom. And yet Engelbrecht survives time and again, which is entirely appropriate, considering that bets are made in minutes and years rather than pounds sterling. When he drops points in a boxing match against a grandfather clock, he ages at an accelerated rate. When he elopes with a cuckoo clock, it lets him down by striking twelve and releasing a pterodactyl from its hatch.

One of the many triumphs of this book is the complete annihilation of all Gothic clichés. There's no longer any need to worry about the seriousness of ghouls, skeletons, witches, warlocks, nightmare abbeyes or hippogriffs with snakes for manes who bite their riders in the Grand Cosmological. The next time a demon appears by the side of a reader of this book, it is certain to be laughed back to hell or challenged to an afternoon of cricket. Richardson leads a cross country race over the landscapes of the Gothic imagination and few dark truths or rotten shadows survive the pounding. It's exhausting and refreshing. There's a scene near the beginning of Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator* where it is remarked of the German hordes facing the Roman legions that a people should know when they are

beaten. Our own contemporary Goths had their collective jaw broken half a century ago and they still haven't realised. This wonderful reprint by the noble folk of Savoy gives them another chance to twig the damage and concede defeat.

## MEMOIRS

### SEX, SURREALISM, DALI AND ME

Clifford Thurlow

Razor Books, £20

reviewed by Andrew Hook

In 1969 the Colombian actor Carlos Lozano arrived in Paris and fortuitously met the painter Salvador Dali by chance. Embraced by Dali predominantly because of his androgynous looks, Lozano swiftly became the new addition amongst an entourage of players and occasional misfits whose attention was rewarded by a degree of patronage, and an insider's view to Dali's real secret life.

Subsequently, by chance again, the writer Clifford Thurlow met Lozano at his art gallery in Cadaques, and through the development of a friendship these memoirs were written. This book is evidently very much a joint project between Lozano and Thurlow. The autobiographical style is coupled with an elegant and compassionate prose, by which Thurlow has metamorphosed Lozano's reminiscences bringing them vividly and refreshingly to life.

Lozano is a likeable, occasionally naive, but trustful narrator, with a world view not dissimilar from the painter's himself: 'life is a road that disintegrates behind us with each step we take... I have always felt sorry for those people who find pleasure solely in retrospect and anticipation'. It is his direct retelling of events which gives this book its edge, and shocks the unwary with occasionally salacious tales.

Of course, although Lozano's upbringing in Columbia is interesting and relevant, it is naturally the moments with Dali which are the focal point of the book. Lozano has maintained a great affection for the painter which is intriguing because Dali's public persona often deliberately portrayed him as little other than an insufferable, albeit irrepressible, egoist. Lozano's attachment, however, was so deep that he often regarded Dali as a father figure, although he admits that 'in Don Salvador I had found a teacher, with teachings so subtle I was never sure if I were learning or losing something'.

As Lozano's role moved from *objet d'art* to procurer of the strange and beautiful he was granted deeper knowledge of Dali's obsessions and voyeuristic tendencies which were often translated onto canvas. The book deals openly and honestly with the question of Dali's sexuality, his abhorrence of being touched by women, and the fact that masturbation was his only release. In a surreal world of his own making the transsexual Amanda Lear embodied the inner soul of Dali himself, neither one thing

nor the other, yet anything to anybody.

Dali's decline into old age and the subsequent vandalism of his business affairs hurts Lozano who comments: 'he boasted of his impotence and became impotent...he wanted to cretinize the world and became cretinized'. This humanises Dali into something other than the almost omnipotent genius that he wished us to believe in. These snippets of realism greatly enhance this book.

Salvador Dali's life is littered with biography and autobiography – much of it contradictory and wilfully ambiguous (especially the painter's own accounts). Here, however, is something else. A delicately told, warm and affectionate memoir which is oozing with both innocence and passion. Whilst it may not reveal the true Dali, it does appear to be a valid account of one person's genuine perception of the true Dali – and therefore is a must for any of the painter's aficionados.

## FILMS

### MEMENTO

Written & Directed by Christopher Nolan

Guy Pierce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Mark Boone Junior. 113 minutes. Certificate 15. On General Release

reviewed by Alec Worley

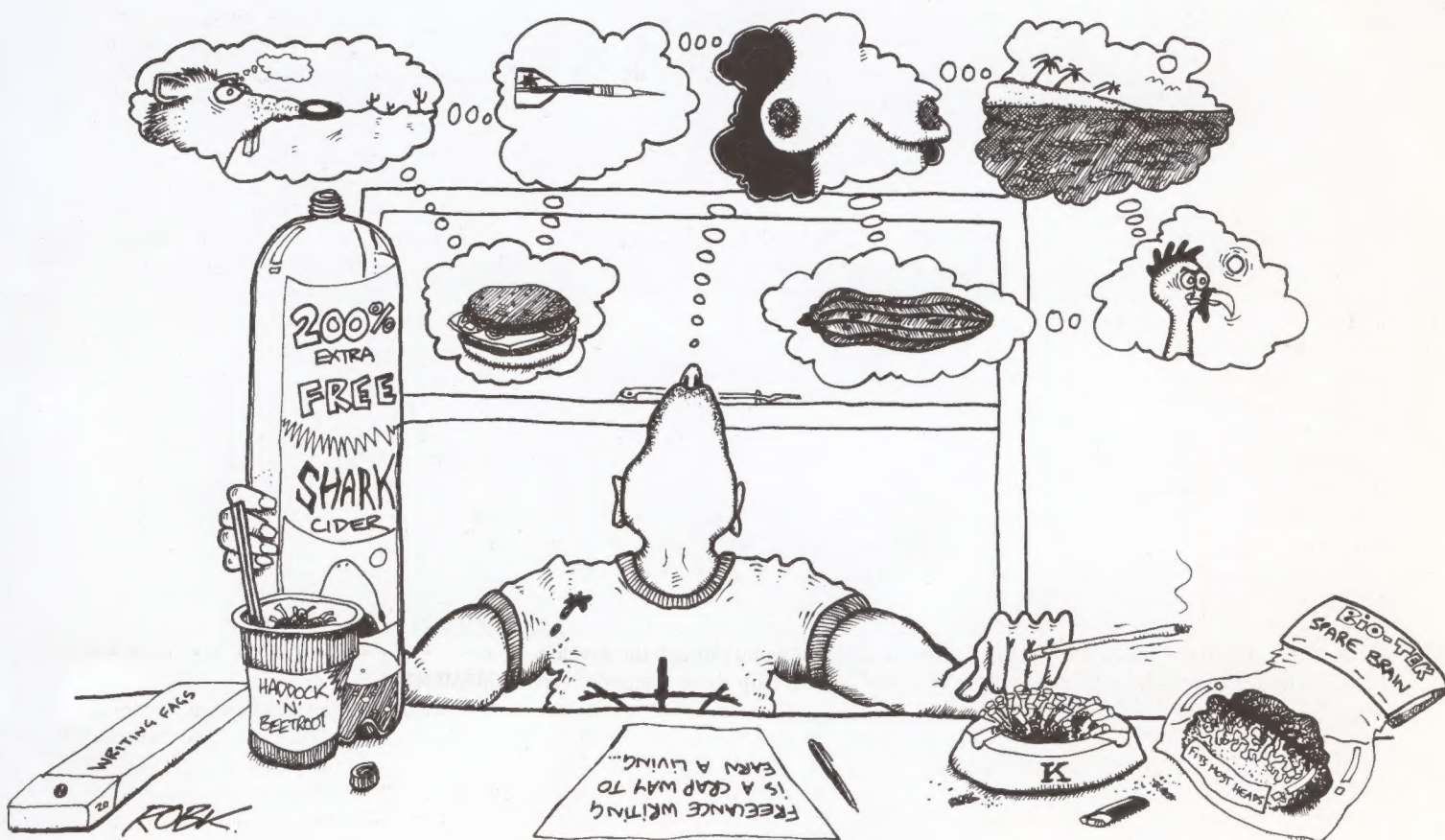
Guy Pierce is Leonard Shelby, an LA detective who can barely remember his own name; every time he wakes up it's with a blur of panic as he tries to remember just where he is. Since the brutal rape and murder of his beloved wife he has suffered from short-term memory loss, a condition that leaves him unable to form new memories. Bent on avenging his wife he searches for her killer, and the only clue to the man's identity are the tantalizing initials 'JG', that and a strange collection of memoranda: an accumulation of makeshift tattoos and a clutch of hastily snapped Polaroids.

*Memento* is a stunningly realized neo-noir, opening with a startling scene in which Shelby has finally captured his quarry and blown his brains out (a scene played entirely in reverse, with the victim's blood dribbling back into the wound and the empty shell case flipping itself back into the gun); the rest of the story unfolds in a series of backtracking episodes. It's a terrifically dextrous trope, which writer-director Christopher Nolan pulls off masterfully, wringing equal amounts of pathos and humour from the quandary of his central character. Guy Pierce embodies cold tenacity and wide-eyed bewilderment in his performance as a man who forgot to remember, while there is shifty support from *Matrix*-grads Carrie Ann Moss and Joe Pantoliano, as ruthless femme fatale and sleazy cop respectively.

*Memento* is a brilliantly kaleidoscopic construction that will require multiple viewings to appreciate just how cunningly composed it is. Quite simply, this is an astonishing movie, and one that – if you'll excuse the cliché – I can't recommend enough.



# SUCCESS . . . AND HOW TO AVOID IT



## MAT COWARD

There are thousands of books for writers, and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The *How-To-Make-A-Million-With-Your-Pen-In-Four-Easy-Lessons* guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

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- 2 Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they should write a book

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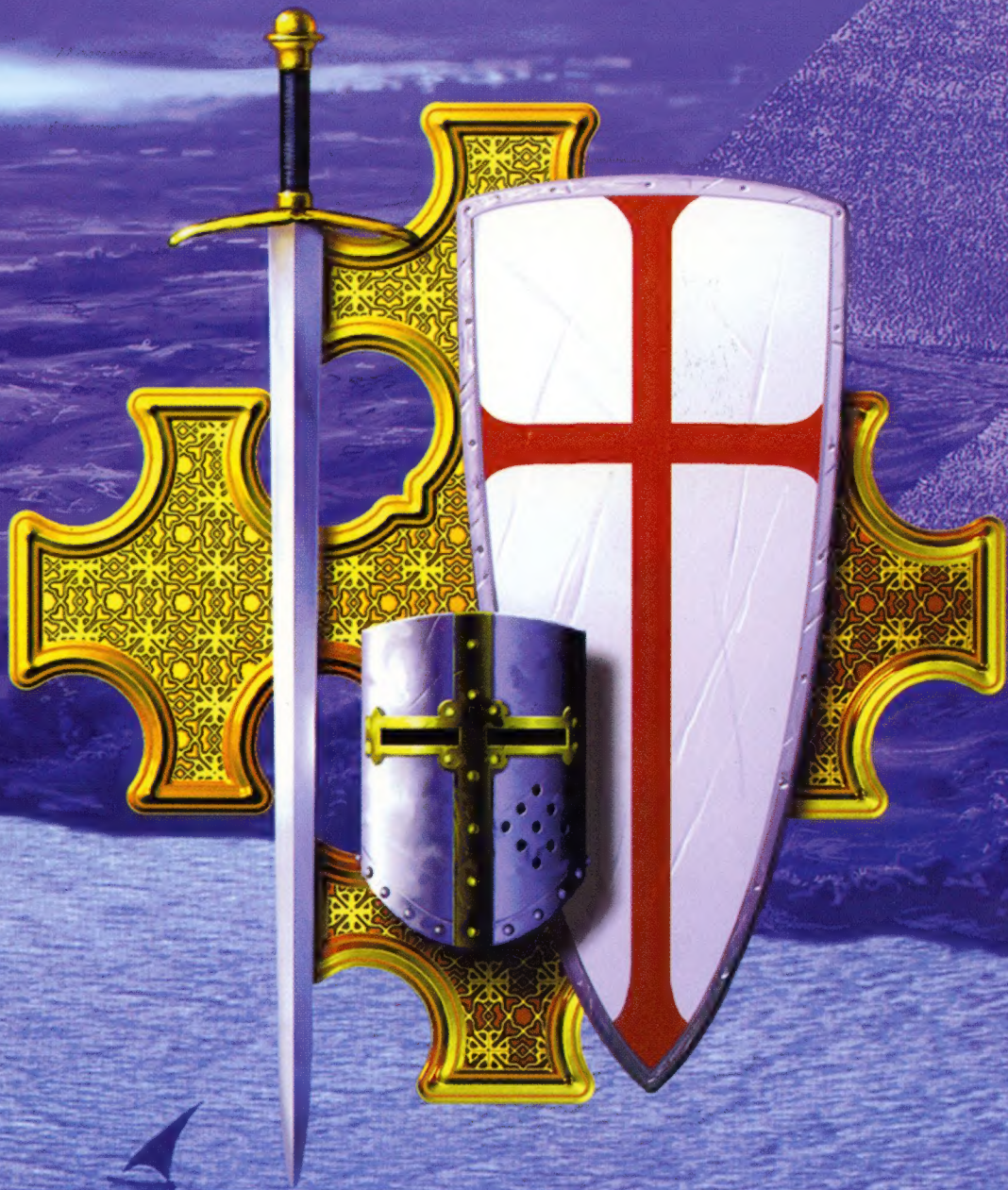
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